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JACK SAND THE BOSS OF THE TOWN OR THE FOOL OF FIDDLER'S FOLLY.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE

CHAPTER I.

A BREEZY LITTLE ENCOUNTER.

THE Crystal Palace—a name derived from its lavish display of mirrors and decanters—was Cony Flat's "brag" saloon.

Captain Plunkett, whose personal gallantry was of the pronounced type peculiar to the West, encouraged the attendance of the "ladies," and enforced on all of his patrons the strictest propriety—according to the Western code—in word and act.

Mr. Tony Baxter, the "barker" of the concern, was master of ceremonies in this particular. He had a close-cropped bullet head, mounted on shoulders that at once commanded respect. He also had a very impressive trick of walking on his toes and bending so as to whisper into the ear of the person addressed; when his smile, all the more bland by reason of his long upper lip, had a strangely soothing effect on irritated nerves.

Billy Bucklew, who sat midway of the long green-topped table, with a silver box before him, was a quite different sort of person. He was of elegant proportions, with a slender waist and small extremities. His hands were white and soft, with long taper fingers. A heavy seal ring adorned the little finger of his left hand, and a

THE INSTRUMENT WAILED WITH AN ALMOST HUMAN ANGUISH.

diamond flashed from his immaculate shirt-bosom. He was in his shirt-sleeves, with a very low-cut vest. The arrangement of his hair was a marvel of the barber's art, as was also the perfect shaving of his chin. His teeth were dazzlingly white, and perfume exhaled from his dainty person.

He never smiled nor betrayed any emotion whatever while on duty, though he was peculiarly fascinating when in attendance on the ladies.

He kept a cocked revolver on a little shelf under the table, within easy reach of his right hand.

Directly opposite him sat a man who was fairly his rival in point of personal neatness. He too wore spotless linen, but without any vest. He had an even larger diamond in his shirt-bosom, and a more imposing seal ring on his finger. He wore a broad-brimmed slouch hat, canted far over his left eye. His mustaches and goatee, of heavy growth, waxed and twisted to needle-points at the ends, were dyed jet-black. He had two silver-mounted revolvers and an ivory-handled bowie-knife slung to the belt which supported his pantaloons. His boots, into which the latter were tucked, had morocco legs and high French heels.

This personage was the elegant Mr. Jack Sand.

His neighbor on the right, to whom he paid marked attentions, was a lady who wore a hat with a gracefully-curved brim and a profusion of soft plumes. The body of her dress, fitting her like a riding-habit, displayed the flowing curves of her figure to charming advantage. A plain standing collar and cuffs gave her an air of simple elegance, as contrasted with the flaring toilets affected by the other ladies in the room.

Her features were delicate and regular. The black brows which met across her forehead were so fine and so gracefully penciled that, instead of hardening the expression of her face, they only served to bring out the beauty of her dark eyes.

This lady was Nobody's Nell. She was the belle of Cony Flat, as of any other place that she chose to honor with her presence.

On the other side of Jack Sand, toward which his back was slightly turned, sat a man in the ordinary miner's dress of red flannel shirt and coarse trowsers. As long as he behaved himself, his money was as good as any man's. He was a stranger in the place, and as yet "not knowin' to the ways o' the establishment," as a muttered oath presently showed.

No one about the table paid any heed to him; but the offensive words had scarcely passed his lips when he felt a gentle tap on his shoulder.

He whirled round in no pleasant humor—for his loss had been a heavy one—to confront Mr. Tony Baxter, with his unctuous smile.

"Friend," whispered that functionary, as if reproving a breach of decorum in church, yet so as not to disturb the congregation, "out of respect for the ladies, ye understand, we don't do no swarin' hyar in the Crystal Palace Saloon."

After a stare of astonishment and a glance which took in Mr. Baxter's proportions—to which scrutiny the "barker" submitted with unruffled serenity—the offender muttered some sort of apology, and "subsided."

But the matter was not to drop so.

Jack Sand had won; so it was to his interest to "keep his mouth shut." Nevertheless he cried out, sharply:

"Drop it, Billy! That's snide!"

Billy Bucklew flashed a lightning glance across the table.

It was met by an icy smile and the cool, determined light in his challenger's level gaze.

"What d'ye mean?" he asked, his face whitening, and a danger signal leaping into his eyes.

"Jest what I said," replied Mr. Jack Sand, drawing one side of his mustache through his fingers, and twirling the end. "That was a false turn, and you know it as well as I do."

A moment of deathlike silence ensued, while the men gazed into each other's eyes.

Every one in the room knew that there was but one way out of that direct locking of horns. The man who made such a charge must be prepared to sustain it with his life. On the other hand, a dealer who had laid himself open to a well-founded accusation of that sort had no chance to back out.

As you "call" your opponent at poker with an equal stake to see his hand, so you "call" a faro-dealer at the mouth of your revolver when you have a curiosity to inspect the pack from which he is drawing.

The coolest person in the room, next to Mr. Jack Sand, was Nobody's Nell. She fully understood the niceties of the situation, yet she sat quietly observant.

The man whose profanity had been reproved by Tony Baxter was eager to support the charge, which would reverse his fortunes. Nevertheless, in view of the strict personal accountability to which any participant would be held, it would be time enough for a prudent man to assert himself when victory had perched on the self-appointed champion's banner.

One moment of deathlike silence; and then Billy Bucklew said, in husky tones:

"Air you out o' pocket? What air ye squealin' about?"

This in itself was an acknowledgment of defeat in that battle of the eye, if not of guilt.

A withering sneer curled his accuser's lips.

"I ain't takin' that kind of winnin's," he said, pushing back the chips that the croupier had shoved over to him with his long rake. "If your trainer wants to cover up your leetle twists o' the wrist, he ought to see that he has thieves all round the table, as well as at the box."

With an oath of concentrated fury, Billy Bucklew leaped to his feet, snatching up the cocked revolver of which mention has been made.

There was a double flash—one on either side of the table—and the room rung with blended reports.

The elegant Mr. Jack Sand, without rising from his chair, had thrown up his arms, and at the same time wriggled his body out of line, so that he escaped with two bullet-holes through his shirt and an abrasion of the skin on the side next his heart.

Billy Bucklew fell forward across the table, and there lay, with a blue spot in the middle of his forehead.

He was stone dead!

CHAPTER II.

A "SKIN" GAME.

"Hold on, gentlemen!"

Jack Sand threw up his hand, while his right yet held the smoking revolver which had done such fatal execution.

Every one had leaped forward with cries of dismay.

Tony Baxter, with a "bruiser's" instinct, was about to spring upon the victor with only the weapons which nature had supplied to him. His thought was to pluck him off his feet, and hurl him to the floor with crushing force. Then he might have "stamped him out," adding the horror of mangling to that of death.

But a low, musical voice said:

"Gently, Mr. Baxter!"

And he looked into the calm eyes of Nobody's Nell.

The lady made no move toward drawing any weapon, but he knew that she always carried a little gold-mounted revolver somewhere in the folds of her dress, and that she had the reputation of being the quickest snap-shot in the mines.

Jack Sand was a comparative stranger in Cony Flat, while Captain Plunkett was "solid with the boys," and Billy Bucklew had his friends. A breath might precipitate the whole house upon him, when he would be literally riddled with bullets.

But without seeming to be ruffled in the least, he held them with the magnetic power of his eye.

"Hold on, gentlemen!" he said quietly. "Remember that, when I interfered in the interests of fair-play, I put myself out of pocket, while some of you have me to thank that you are not cheated. If I cannot prove that that was a false turn, and further, that this is a doctored pack, hold me to a strict account. Maybe some of you are not up to the tricks of this trade, and I can give you a point or two that will save your money in future."

He struck the right chord. There is no damper to partisanship like opposed self-interest.

"Give him a show!" shouted one who would gain by the maintenance of his charge.

Meanwhile there had been a rush from the bar to the scene of the tragedy.

Foremost among the new-comers was Captain Plunkett.

"Gentlemen! gentlemen!" he cried, "what is all this?"

"Keep your hands off of that body!" said Jack to the croupier, who was about to lift the dead man, ostensibly to see if he was indeed beyond help.

He was light-fingered, and might have tampered with something which the body held secure.

Then Jack addressed Captain Plunkett:

"Your dealer has been a little over-zealous in the interests of the bank," he said, looking steadily into the eyes of the man whom he meant to mold to his own purposes. "Of course, nobody suspects that it was with the knowledge or approval of his employer. The friends of Captain Plunkett know him well enough to feel confident that he will be foremost in securing a full and fair investigation, which will vindicate himself and place his establishment more firmly than ever in the confidence of the community."

The proprietor of the Crystal Palace flushed under the questioning eyes of his waiting patrons. He was clever enough to take the buncombe in Sand's little speech for what it was worth. He knew that Jack knew that a breath would blow his reputation away like a house of cards.

If he had any knowledge of his dealer's devious methods, he was shrewd enough and unscrupulous enough to make a scape-goat of the dead man by repudiating the practices by which, undetected, he would have profited.

"Gentlemen," he said, "my intimate friends are aware that I scarcely know one card from

another. I am, therefore, under the necessity of intrusting this department entirely to another. For my part, I do not see how there can be any foul-play where you have a full pack, fairly shuffled, put into the box, and drawn out one card at a time. But if the gentleman can prove that it can be done, and that it really has been done, he is right in supposing that I will be the first man to put my foot on it. If it is true, I cannot, of course, make reparation to you individually, since it will be impossible to tell how much you have suffered. But I'll tell you what I will do. I'll stand the biggest treat to all hands round that this town or any other has ever seen!"

"What d'ye want squarer than that? Hooray fur Captain Plunkett! The Crystal Palace all the while! Hip! hip!"

And the room rung with three cheers and a "tigah."

Then, grinning their good-will, the friends of the captain gathered about him, slapping him on the back and shaking his hand, and openly calling him a good fellow.

Jack Sand laughed in his sleeve at the ease with which shrewd rascality leads by the nose the simple public, equally knavish for the most part, to the extent of its capabilities.

"I have no doubt, sir," he said, "that we are all of one mind. Let justice be done!"

"I can heartily indorse that sentiment, sir," responded the captain. "Let full and equitable justice to be done!"

And the crowd wagged their heads and bobbed assent to one another, in a way that said that these were two "powerful smart" men, to have hit upon so original an embodiment of wisdom and goodness.

"It only remains to form a committee in whose fairness all will have confidence," began the captain; when he was interrupted by an ardent devotee—at a respectful distance!—of the belle of Cony Flat.

"What's Nobody's Nell doin' hyar?" shouted the fellow, fixing his eyes upon the lady with a grin of admiration that spread from ear to ear. "I reckon we'll all stand by what she says. Eh, boys?"

To this appeal to its chivalry Cony Flat responded as one man.

"You will favor us, Miss Nell?" asked the captain, with his most gallant bow.

"Certainly," replied the lady, as if the request were the most ordinary.

And while two men lifted Billy Bucklew off the box, she walked round to the other side of the table.

"The turn before us," said Jack, "is the trey of diamonds and the jack of clubs. Will some one name the turn before that?"

"A split," volunteered one of the bystanders, "the seven o' hearts and the seven o' clubs."

"Then the trey of diamonds ought to cover the seven of hearts?"

"That's no lie in that!"

"Will the lady oblige us by lifting the trey of diamonds?"

Nobody's Nell complied daintily.

A groan of indignation went round the room.

"The queen of spades," she said.

"Now, if you will take up the queen?"

She did so, and the seven of hearts was found beneath it.

"It is a clear case!" said Captain Plunkett, fairly wallowing in humiliation. "A skin-game has been played in my house!"

He gave the case its worst designation, and so disarmed further criticism. On the contrary, his friends gathered about him and tried to shift from his shoulders the burden of odium he had voluntarily assumed.

"Look a-hyar, Cap! we're all allowin' as how this hyar wa'n't fur you to keep the run of, the which you ain't posted in keerds nohow. We all know that!"

And while the captain protested his culpability, Jack Sand, for once in his life at least, made a grave mistake. Having the captain "down," he "crowded" him!

"If you will allow me, after the lady has counted the remaining cards, I will prove the whole of my statement, by showing these gentlemen the difference between a one-card box and a two-card box."

"By all means," assented the captain. "Let us go to the bottom of this villainy!"

And already his friends began to glower at Jack for subjecting so virtuous a gentleman to such an exposure!

Upon being counted, the number of cards remaining proved to be odd.

"Another false turn before the finish would have corrected this—at the expense of some of the gentlemen, present!" said Jack, remorselessly.

Then to a breathless audience he proceeded to show the neat little device by which one card or two, at the option of the dealer, may be made to slide from the innocent-looking receptacle, and how the cards were trimmed with a view to the stocking-trick called "stripping."

"He's deuced knowin' to that sort o' thing!" muttered one who profited by this lesson; and this was the key-note of the situation which was to grow out of Jack's mistake in crowding the captain too far.

To show their good-will, the boys insisted that the game go on as if nothing had happened.

Whereupon, the admirer of the belle saw his chance again, and "went for it!"

"Hyar's Nell ag'in! What's the matter with her? I allow she'd orter handle the pasteboards with them slim fingers o' hern to beat ary galoot as ever showed up in this hyar camp. Give 'er a call, boys!"

They did so, amid boisterous laughter at his open homage.

Once more Nell complied with the general wish, dealing the cards with a dexterity and grace which showed that the office was not new to her; and the night passed without further disturbance.

But on the morrow—

CHAPTER III.

"TROUBLE BEGINS!"

"EPHRA—ham," said the "sponsible Mistah Johnson" to the "spectable Mistah Brown," "dis hyeah's gwine fur to be a *large* day fur Cony Flat—now mind I tole ye!"

"Wha's—wha's—*wha's* dis hyeah, Brudder Johnson, sah?" stuttered Mr. Brown, lowering his head in a way that forcibly suggested a billy-goat about to butt, while he blinked his eyes rapidly, in absorbed attention.

"Dah's been great carryin'-on at de Crys'al Palace S'loon—dis hyeah rapsallion, Bucklew, de fahro dealah, fired unprepahred befo' de Jedgment Seat!—*great* carryin'-on!"

"Yes, sah! yes, sah! yes, sah!"

"An' dey's gwine fur to chuck him in de groun' like a dead dog, widout no ministeh ob de Gospel fur to 'seach de good Lo'd to hab marcy on him aban'on soul!"

"Da's—da's—da's *bad*!"

"An' dat 'ah ain't de wo'stes!"

"Ugh?"

"Ugh—ugh! Dey's gwine to had a jubilation, like de headen Canaanites dat done gone run afteh false gods, wid 'bominable rites ob fiah an' human flesh! Yes, sah!—dese modern wushipers ob Baal, B'elzebub an' Apollyon am gwine to gib de day ober to obfustification. Tell ye what it is, Brudder Brown—ef de Lo'd send de angel Gab'r'el to dis hyeah Sodom an' Gomorrer, he won't find only two faithful sarvants in de Cities ob de Plain!"

"Reckon, now, it's all de same to de Lo'd, ef dis hyeah *am* radder hilly country. Ugh, Brudder Brown?"

"Ugh—ugh! S'pect it is, Brudder Johnson."

It had been the habit of these children of light to "hold meetin'" regularly every Sabbath in the kitchen of the Cony Flat Hotel. At first the boys went to the "show," to scoff; but Brother Johnson proved so eloquent in exhortation, and Brother Brown so unctuous in prayer and psalm-singing, that the thing was finally voted an institution of the place and an object of vainglory over other camps not equally favored.

Then the proprietor of the hotel, with a worldly eye to what there was "in it," transferred the field of their labors from the kitchen to the more commodious bar; several of the hardest characters constituted themselves "pillars" of the new church; and everybody was compelled to behave and drop two bits into the hat.

"But, lo! Brother Johnson proved to be a stanch—the boys called it "copper-bottomed"—Baptist, and Brother Brown an equally zealous Methodist, and with the prospect of making converts the strife waxed so hot that the church was hardly "on its feet" before it was threatened with a "split."

Then mine host of the Cony Flat Hotel swore a round oath that he would "knock the whole blasted thing in the head," if they didn't harmonize their differences. He put the thing on a strictly business basis, telling them that they were making a good thing out of it, and so was he. Brother Johnson was adding materially to his wages as cook, and the odd jobs by which Brother Brown pretended to live during the week were not a circumstance to the revenue derived from his services on Sunday.

"Ef it was whether a man was to have water in his whisky," said he, "ther might be something to kick about; but ef you're goin' to kill the goose that lays the golden egg all fur some crotchet as to how a man shall have water slapped onto the outside of his body, hang me ef I don't bounce the pair o' ye, an' hire a heathen Chinese fur my pot-wrastle!"

Thereupon the co-laborers took the matter into prayerful consideration, and concluded that it would be the hight of folly as well as impiety, to put themselves out of pocket, and at the same time let the heathen come in and blight the first blossoms of the true faith. So the thrifty landlord continued to realize on one sort of spirits while Brothers Johnson and Brown wrestled with the other.

And now Brother Johnson, in a half-chant, deplored the wickedness of the place, and set over against it the reward that awaited himself and Brother Brown for their faithful services, until the latter suddenly threw up his hands and shouted:

"Hallelujah! Bress de Lamb!"

Then, beginning to jump with a shuffling slide, he burst into song:

"Bruise wid yer heel de head ob de sarpint!
Oh, praise, my soul!"

"Hallo, daddy! What's the matter with you? Are you getting happy?"

Brother Brown stopped his chant and his dance, and, bent as he was to the semblance of a sort of human letter S, slowly turned his head so as to see the new-comer out of the corner of his eye.

"Am dat you, Missy Nell?" asked Brother Johnson, looking round.

"Why, of course it is! Don't I look like myself?"

Brother Johnson ran his eye over her dress, and shook his head with a deep sigh.

"Tain't alays de looks, Missy Nell. Le Lo'd don't trouble hisse'f wid de outside show. Dem ah's only de shucks dat he shuffles into de fiah. It's de kernel ob de grain an' de hearts ob his chillens dat's sweet to de palate ob de Lo'd!"

"Why, yes, of course!" assented the lady, in some confusion. "But then—"

"It grieve my heart powerful sight, Missy Nell, to see you missin' at de meetin' las' Lo'd's Day," interrupted Brother Johnson, with a boldness which came from the consciousness of doing the work of the Master.

The flush deepened on the girl's cheek, and a throe of pain knit her brows and caused a momentary quivering of her sensitive nostrils, while the proud lift of her head failed.

"No! no! I was not there!" she said, in a low voice.

"But ye ain't gwine fur to gib it up? Oh, don't ye turn away! Now, while de Lo'd's a-stribin' wid ye, oh, gib him heed! Ef ye once git yer grip on de Rock ob Ages, de debil an' all his angels can't t'ar ye loose! Oh, come! while yet dah is time! What am de rags ob dis wicked worl' compahred wid de white robes washed in de blood of de Lamb? What am de jimcracks dug out o' de yeth an' fashioned by de han' ob man, ef ye kin hab, only fur de askin', a crown ob glory an' a harp ob righteousness? What am de praises ob men, as comes a-gallavantin' around ye now, but can't none ob 'em go wid ye acrost de dark ribber—"

"Oh, stop! stop! stop!" cried the girl, claspin' her hands, with keen pain in face and voice. "I didn't come to you to have you talk to me like that!"

"It's de Lo'd, Missy Nell, dat's a-talkin' to ye de loudes'. Dah! dah! I's done. I didn't go fur to make ye cry. But I's a-hopin' an' a-prayin' dat His voice will keep on in yer heart, tell ye loose yer grip on pride, de worl', de flesh an' de debil, an' frow yerself at de feet ob de bressed Jesus!"

The girl choked down a sob, and her eyes flashed with anger that he had power to so move her.

"Haven't I come after you when I had no call to, just so that that fellow, who is nothing to me, should have a decent send-off? The boys would shove him under ground without troubling you for any of your gospel-talk!"

"Ye hain't done nuffin' fur me, Missy Nell," replied Brother Johnson, humbly. "Dis pore mortal, as ain't fit fur to wrastle de pots in de Mahster's kitchen, ain't no 'count, no how ye kin fix it! You's done it all fur de Lo'd; an' he don't fergit no little 'counts dat he lets stand ober tell Saturday night, 'kaze he hain't got no loose change handy."

"Well, they're getting ready to take him to the high lot; and I thought you could say something that would make it seem more as if it was folks, and not merely dumping carrion."

"We's waitin' fur de Lo'd's sarvice, me an' Brudder Brown!"

"A-a-men!" groaned Brother Brown, unctuously.

Then together they went to the Crystal Palace Saloon.

The whole camp was gathered in and about the place. They were to "plant" Bill Bucklew; and after that every man was to get drunk in his own way, at Captain Plunkett's expense.

A rough box had been knocked together, and a grave was being dug. But when the boys learned of Nell's purpose to have appropriate memorial services, they resolved to "do the thing up brown."

In want of more suitable material, the box was covered with canvas which had been intended for tenting; and a friend, who had been a shipping-clerk in the States, traced Billy's name on the lid in fair characters—with shoe-blackening! Over the coffin was thrown a flag which the camp was patriotic enough to possess, to the immense satisfaction of the boys.

But now the ladies took the contagion; and their taste added leaves woven into festoons and wreaths, and a bouquet culled from the flower-pots—rough wooden boxes—which some of them had cultivated with loving care.

"By the jumpin' Jingo!" cried an enthusiastic soul, standing off to admire the effect, "it's all day when a man passes in his checks; but it's almost wo'th it, to git such a bang-up send-off! Now, I reckon it does Billy proud to see this hyar demonstration!"

When everything was in readiness, the box was lifted on the shoulders of four of Billy's most intimate friends; and with Brothers Johnson and Brown walking before it with heads re-

verently uncovered, the ladies following after, and the boys fetching up the rear "in two ranks," the procession moved toward the hill-side where they had prepared "a high lot" among several others, all of which had been filled by victims of violence.

Brother Johnson took his stand at the head of the grave, Brother Brown at the foot; the ladies stood in a group at one side, and the boys completed the circle.

It goes without saying that the ladies wept—some of them with an ever-present consciousness of the danger of streaking the paint on their cheeks, but one or two, the most emotional, without any regard to appearances.

The boys looked to these with a feeling akin to awe; and one muttered:

"Pore things! They can't stan' it, nohow!"

But Brother Johnson lifted his hand to impose silence, and every eye was turned upon him. Men who hardly ever addressed him without a gibe of some sort, for the time held him in respect.

His faith was of the most literal kind, with none of the glossing with which modern Christianity, like a "moral 'show," has excluded "everything that could offend the most fastidious taste." His Bible read "hell-fire," and he preached it to the letter, until women grew pale under their rouge, and the boys were ready to "swear that they could smell the brimstun!"

"Oh, my brudders an' my sisters!" he cried, lifting his hands with his well-worn Bible held open in one, while he gazed about on his audience with tears streaming down his black cheeks, "what shill we say ober de grabe o' dis hyeah young man, cut down in de midst ob him iniquities? Is he down dah in de lake dat's a-bubblin' an' a-b'illin' furebber, a-bobbin' up an' down like de cork on yer fish-line, when de catfish am a-stealin' ob yer bate, an' ain't takin' de hook nohow? Is he down dah whah dah's a-wailin' an' a-gnashin' ob teef? Ye needn't t'ink dat dey let ye off 'kaze ye hain't got nuffin' but a few ole snags located hit-an'-miss in de jaw-bone, like me an' Brudder Brown."

"A-a-men!" groaned Brother Brown.

"De debil, he look out dat ye got teef enough fur to gnash along o' de rest, ef he on't git ye down dah!"

"But, oh! let us hope dat de Lo'd enchered de ole debil jist at de last minute!—dat he stretch fort' his han' an' snatch dis, our brudder, like a bran' f'om de burnin'! Dah ain't nuffin' in dis, hyeah wicked worl' like de Lo'd's marcy. De whiskin' ob a lamb's tail ain't none too quick fur him! He's *always* a-waitin', jest like a mudder when de little pickaninny's larnin' to use its trotters. Dat's de way Jesus waits—wid one han' on dis side an' one han' on dat side, all ready fur to cotch ye, ef ye stub yer toe ag'in' de stones ob temptation."

"Den ef dis pore sinneh, between de shootin' ob de hole in his forehead like de bran ob Cain, an' de glazin' ob his eye, cried out:—'Lo'd! Lo'd!'—dat was enough. De bressed Lo'd ain't so 'tic'lar as some o' dese hyeah Christians dat puts ye frough a rigmarole as long as yer arm, 'bout whah you come f'om, an' whedder you know Brudder Jones, an' ef you's 'lated to sister Robi'son;—de Lo'd don't ask ye no sich sassy questions befo' he turns de golden key an' opens de pearly gate fur to let ye pass into yer heabenly home. Oh, no! blessed be his name!"

"A-a-men!" groaned Brother Brown.

So he struck the balance between salvation and eternal woe, often recurring to his text—"Flee f'om de wraf to come!" The longer he dwelt upon it, the more terrible became his delineations, the more heart-rending his tones of appeal and denunciation, until impressionable women went into hysterics, weeping and even screaming.

Then he turned to the slayer, and harping on the command, "Dou shalt not kill!" scored the back of the elegant Mr. Jack Sand with the lash of his eloquence so as to impart just the impetus public sentiment awaited.

The men recurred to the fact that Jack had shown himself "mighty knowin'" in the ways of fraud, and suddenly bethought them that he had been very lucky at cards; the women made a martyr of Billy Bucklew, bemoaning his untimely fate as a public calamity; and all agreed that Captain Plunkett was as "white" a man as you could "scare up" anywhere, and it was a "dog-gone shame" that his nose should beso rubbed in the dirt!

Jack Sand had felt a natural delicacy about attending the funeral of his victim. For the same reason he could not well mingle with the "mourners" who later swarmed in and out of the Crystal Palace, getting outside of the free whisky with astonishing rapidity.

This at once made him a sort of outcast; and the men who roamed up and down the street, yelling and firing off their revolvers, frowned blackly at him as they passed.

Of the women, those who had yielded most to the religious excitement of the morning now gave the rein to all that was worst in their perverted natures; and at the various dance-houses the wildest debauchery prevailed.

Never in all its evil career had Cony Flat seen such a day as this

At last came the crisis. A squad of perhaps a score issued from the Crystal Palace, walking in an orderly manner, though not in ranks, and followed at a little distance by a turbulent mob.

They went straight up to Jack, where he sat before the Cony Flat Hotel, picking his teeth after a supper for which the foreboding prospect could not destroy his appetite.

He coolly cast his eye over them. They were representative men of the place, Captain Plunkett alone being conspicuous by his absence.

"Well, gentlemen?" he said, quietly.

"We've come fur you!" said Judge Jeremy Dowd, with a pompous air which was a little exaggerated by reason of his "carrying about as much top-hammer as he could well sail under."

"I supposed so," replied Jack, lifting one foot to his knee, to scratch a match on the sole of his boot, and then leisurely lighting a cigar, turning it round and round, and looking at the end to see if it was evenly started. "Pray proceed."

"We'll trouble you to consider yourself a prisoner, and precede us into the bar of the hotel."

Jack rose.

"I am at your disposal," was the careless answer.

CHAPTER IV.

THE QUARTERMASTER'S GRIP-SACK.

JUST at nightfall on Cony Flat's "big" day, a light army ambulance, drawn by two strong and sure-footed mules, entered the one rambling street of the mining-camp.

On the front seat, beside the driver, sat Quartermaster Balfour. At his feet was a small grip-sack; and between his knees, and resting in the hollow of his left arm, stood a Winchester rifle. In addition to this, he had two highly-finished revolvers strapped to his waist.

Just behind him, on the rear seat, sat two stout fellows in the uniform of the private of the "reg'lar army, oh!" They were similarly armed and alert.

A fourth rifle leaned against the seat between Major Balfour and his driver.

All of this warlike array had reference to the contents of the grip-sack on the one hand, and on the other, the proclivity of the cowboy to turn road agent whenever his health seems to demand a change of air and occupation.

"Will we shtop heur the night, yer honor?" asked Pat Croghan, the driver.

"No," replied Major Balfour. "I don't care to give these fellows time to get up a combination against us. We will put up all regular, as if we intended to stop over. That will fix them until morning. And between twelve and one we will slip away on the quiet. Besides, I am anxious to get on to the post."

Major Balfour did not take his driver into his confidence so far as to admit that the desire to accompany a certain Diana-like young widow on her morning ride had anything to do with this haste; yet such was the case.

"What's goin' on at Dalzel's place?" asked private Murdock.

There certainly were signs of unusual excitement at the Cony Flat Hotel.

A crowd was gathered about the doorway, and into the open windows were thrust as many heads as could find room; while the bar seemed thronged to repletion.

"They've got the whole camp thar, whatever it is," said Pete Schaeffer.

Major Balfour frowned. He didn't like to carry his grip-sack through such a crowd as that.

However, he reflected that while the crowd was so busily engaged, he could get in the back way, and would be seen only by the landlord and the stable-boys; but he found even the stables deserted; and it was only after making a considerable disturbance that he could get attendance.

The result was that he drew some notice that he would rather have done without. Several who could not get near enough to hear what was going on within the bar of the hotel were glad of this diversion.

They took critical stock of the ambulance, of the mules, and of the men; but the grip-sack drew the most inquisitive and lingering glances.

Major Balfour saw that there was no use in trying to preserve any sort of secrecy; so he proceeded to throw dust into the eyes of his unwelcome inspectors.

"Look alive here, young fellah!" he cried, assuming a careless, off-hand air. "See that you rub down those mules well. I want them in good trim by five o'clock in the morning."

Then, taking his grip-sack in his left hand, so as to leave his right free for any emergency, he went on:

"What's all this row about?"

"Waal, ye see, boss," was the reply, "the boys has took it into their heads that this hyar town ain't swell enough fur a gay an' festive gent as slings a metropolitan style; so the question is, whether it's climb a tree, ur git."

"Who is he? What's his name?"

"It's the galoot as the boys calls—'The elegant Mr. Jack Sand.'"

"Oh! It seems to me that I've heard of him before. What has he been up to here?"

"Waal, I allow it ain't nothin' in partic'lar, but a leetle of everythin' in general. It's his all-round style. Ye see, he's mighty lucky with the pasteboards."

"Ah! There's a good many like him, that it would better this country to be without."

"You bet, boss! An honest workin'man don't never git his rights until these hyar white-fingered gents climbs a tree."

And the speaker tried to look exceedingly virtuous.

His life-record was not an unusual one for the "honest workingman" just east of the watershed. Born in the slums of New York city, he had begun life as the head of a regularly-organized band of juvenile robbers, whose exploits at petty thievery served as a 'prenticeship for bolder crime in after life. In breaking jail with a lot of older prisoners, he had helped to beat a keeper to death. He had tried his hand at train-robbing in Missouri, but found that he lacked the hardihood for such ticklish work. For the same reason he had failed as a road-agent in Montana. The cowboy on the war-path, "painting a town fire-red," was his ideal of heroism; but this godlike distinction was only for those who had a less tender regard than he for an unperforated skin. So for the present he was fain to content himself as hostler at the Cony Flat Hotel.

While he was talking with Major Balfour, a man of singularly villainous aspect strolled up to the ambulance, glanced at the vehicle, at the mules, at the grip-sack, and, lastly, with one keen flash, at the men who were guarding it; and then lounged away, as if he found no interest there.

He wore a full beard, as rough as tangled brush-wood. His hat and shirt were perforated with bullet-holes. He appeared to be a Hercules in muscular development. One instinctively felt that he would be a bad man to meet on a lonely road on a dark night.

He was followed by a man, younger and of much slighter build, yet with "slippery knave" stamped all over his smooth, oily face.

"Who is that?" asked Major Balfour, in a lowered tone, indicating the man only by the frowning glance he sent after him.

"That? Oh! that's Blue-ruin Bob," said the hostler.

"Does he belong here?"

"No. He hangs out up at Red Dump. They do say that they're goin' to run him fur alcalde o' that screemin' leetle burg."

"H'm!"

And Major Balfour passed on into the hotel, followed by his men.

The door had but closed upon him when Blue-ruin Bob, who, the moment he had gained the cover of darkness had turned and fixed his lowering gaze upon the quartermaster, growled to his companion:

"Waal?"

Sly Sam, as he was called, replied with the same formula:

"Waal?"

"That thar's a mighty pretty grip-sack, Sam."

"Jest what I was a-thinkin'."

"Kin we see him?"

"You jest bet we kin!"

"He holds two bowers and an ace."

"We kin knock them silly."

"How?"

"With the queen."

"The which?"

"The Queen o' Hearts, greeny. Is a man any the less a man because he's got Uncle Sam's brand on him?"

"Show up, pardner. What air ye tryin' to git through ye?"

"Bob," said his satellite, with the instinctive flattery of a born sycophant, "it's a pity that a man with the heart that you've got ain't better fixed with head. When savvy goes with grit—the which I'm free to own ain't likely to be the case—then thar's music!"

Blue-ruin Bob smiled grimly at this neatly-turned compliment, which pointed out his mental deficiency only as a foil to make his virtue of courage shine the more brightly.

"Waal, Sam," he said, with, on his side, the instinctive patronage of a born bully, "you keep yer head with deuced leetle heart; an' I'll keep my heart without much head—an' by puttin' of 'em together we won't make such a bad team. But what's the lay with the quartermaster, to begin on?"

"It won't take more'n one or two to keep an eye on that thar grip-sack."

"The quartermaster himself, fur one. By the way he froze to it, he won't let it out of his sight fur a minute."

"So much the better fur us. We couldn't do nothin' with him anyway. But if he gives us two of his men to work on—"

"He might as well count on two carcasses to tote into camp—eh? I've been hankerin' arter blue-coat [bait ever sense I come to this hyar country? Dang my hide, ef I don't believe I could chaw up a platoon of 'em to a bite!"

And whipping his bowie out of his boot-leg, he brandished it, and threw himself into the attitudes of a fierce contest, grinding his teeth, and muttering hoarse curses under his breath.

It was the pantomime of a savage, whose vivid imagination, borne out by action, gave him almost the luxurious satisfaction of a real fight.

"Hold on, hyar, Bob!" cried his cooler subordinate. "That thar's the way you let your heart run away with your head."

"Sam!" hissed the other, carried away by the horrible conjurings of his murder-festering brain, "did you ever drink blood?—blood out of a man's body, I mean?"

And, while he clutched his bowie more fiercely, he seized his comrade's arm, and brought his face close to his, so that he could glare into his eyes.

"Blood!—red blood, that you have let out of a black heart with your own hand?" he went on, with increasing fury, until the shrinking Sam began to fear that he might take it into his head to indulge in that elegant pastime at his—Sam's—expense!

"No! I'm blowed ef I ever did!" he cried, hurriedly, and a little quaveringly.

"Waal, I have! Ha! ha! ha! That's a revenge fur ye! I swore to do it; an' by all the furies, I done it!"

And chuckling at the recollection of an orgie of blood that could not be matched this side of the Sandwich Islands, he returned his bowie to its place in his boot-leg, and went on more quietly:

"But what was it about this hyar quartermaster? Two deaders—eh?"

"Dead enough, but not after your way o' thinkin'. Dead drunk's the word."

"Why not finish 'em off at once? It's neater an' surer. They ain't comin' round at awkward times."

"But ef we laid 'em out, wouldn't he stop where he is, a-hatchin' of that thar grip-sack, while he sent to the post fur another body-guard? But ef they git stone-drunk themselves, he may put their heads under the pump, an' try to git on with 'em as they are—the more so because it won't sound well at head-quarters to have it said that he lost time by lettin' 'em git drunk, the which he had no business to while he was totin' the loot."

"That's jest it," objected Blue-ruin Bob. "He won't give ye a chance to operate on 'em."

"Won't he, though? Then I don't know a good-natured officer when I see him, with more head fur dance-steps than fur the regulations. Trust them soldiers to beg like good fellers to git a little run to see the doin's to-night. Then we'll git Nobody's Nell after 'em; an'—good-by John!"

While this plot was forming, Major Balfour had secured his room, placed his men on guard over the precious grip-sack, and gone to forage for supper, as he told them. But pending the preparation of the meal, his curiosity took him as far as the bar of the hotel, to which his distinguished position gave him ready admittance.

CHAPTER V.

A BORDER-RUFFIAN COURT.

"AH, major!" called Judge Jeremy Dowd, from the head of the room. "Step right this way, sir, ef you please! I didn't suppose we was to have such distinguished company—blow me ef I did, sir! But it does me proud to welcome ye, in my humble way, to Cony Flat. You air jest in time, sir, to witness our rude—but effective, ye understand!—our rude but effective administration of justice. Gentlemen, make way fur our distinguished guest, Major Balfour, of the U. S. A."

Jeremy Dowd was called judge—because he was "bare-footed on the top of his head," because he was "pussy" and was never known to appear in a shirt-collar, though he insisted on a "biled" shirt—not remarkable for cleanliness!—and because he had been a shyster hanging about the police court of Chicago until he was debarred.

"Make yerself perfectly at home, major," he said. "We're a sociable crowd hyar. No red tape—Ha! ha! that'll go ag'in' your gall, eh? Set right down hyar, sir; an' we'll have yer liquor along in a minute. Johnny, give the major the best you've got. An' jest try this hyar weed, ef you please!"

Without ceremony the business of the court was suspended until the new arrival was accommodated with a seat, a glass of whisky and a cigar.

The whisky was set on a packing case which stood at the judge's elbow, his guest being placed on the other side.

Before the judge stood a sloping musician's rack, of rough pine. It was put there only for the "style of the thing." When the judge stood up to "spout," it made a graceful rest for his hand.

The jury-box, consisting of boards supported at the ends and middle on candle-boxes, was yet unoccupied.

Along the wall sat several ladies, birds of gay plumage, who kept up a continual fluttering, what with fans and handkerchiefs, and ribbon-bows requiring rearrangements every few minutes. Judged by any civilized standard, it was a tawdry show enough; but the boys ogled them

with glances which said that, "to their notion, it would be hard to beat!"

Nobody's Nell sat among them with an easy elegance which the rest in vain sought to mimic.

Jack Sand leaned, half-sitting, on the edge of a table, with one leg crossed before the other, the toe of his shapely boot touching the floor, coolly paring his nails, apparently the least interested man in the room.

Without stopping to strike a nice balance between his virtues and his vices, Nobody's Nell thought him "the noblest Roman of them all."

Captain Plunkett, resisting the importunities of his friends, had taken an inconspicuous position at the further end of the room.

Judge Dowd rose, drew a red silk handkerchief from the skirt pocket of his coat with a flourish, blew his nose until it resounded like a bugle, and thrust the handkerchief into his bosom. With the other hand beneath his coat skirts and one foot thrust forward in true forensic style, he began:

"Fellow-citizens:—We air assembled hyar fur the performance of a painful duty, but one which we owe to ourselves and to pos—ahem!—to society in general. Governments air founded on the principle that the well-disposed many shall be protected from the depredations of the evil-disposed few. It is an axiom of law—"

"Look a-hyar, jedge!" interrupted a shaggy-bearded and red-shirted miner, "ef you want to show off before the ladies and the major, hyar, jest you hire a cellar on some legal holiday. Jest now we're on business, an' we ain't got no time to throw away on wind."

"Boys, we all know the English of what the jedge is fur puttin' into hog-Latin. We've come hyar to hang yon galoot; an' the less chin-music we have dished up to us, the sooner we'll git shut of him!"

The judge grew purple in the face at this ruthless exposure of his "leetle game." As soon as he could be heard above the laughter and pounding of boot-heels, he retorted with a fine sneer:

"The court scorns the low imputation o' the vilifier in the back part o' the house! It is to be hoped that the gentlemen present have enough self-respect to remember the difference between the dispensing of justice and a dog-fight, and that they will allow the trial to proceed with the decorum necessary to the discharge—"

"Cut 'er short, Jerry!" cried another impatient one.

"Order! order! Give his honor a show!" shouted a man, who wanted to curry favor with the judge in view of a pending horse-trade.

"Yes! yes! give the judge a show!" concurred others, who noted with some chagrin the quietly-observant eye with which Major Balfour, himself the embodiment of discipline, was "taking in" the confused scene.

"Our first duty," said the judge, mopping his bald head and neck furiously, "is to select a fair and impartial jury."

"I move that Brother Johnson be made foreman!" cried a would-be wit.

Seeing his chance to get the laugh with him where it had been at him, the judge retorted upon the jester:

"The Court will appoint Brother Thompson to the place which he thinks might be suitably filled by Brother Johnson."

Josh Thompson threw back his head and opened his mouth till it yawned like the main shaft of a mine, and roared a bellowing guffaw with the crowd.

It was nothing to him that the name of "Brother Thompson" would probably stick to him as long as he lived. He shouldered his way forward amid a hail of slaps on the back that would have left an ordinary man's flesh black and blue and his joints aching, and had his hat knocked over his eyes and was pushed hither and thither, only to turn from side to side, opening his mouth to its widest extent in grimaces of good-nature, replying to their chaff with as good as they sent, and once in a while getting in a "back-hander" that made the recipient's eyes water!

Reaching the jury-box, he put his back against the wall and stretched his long legs, crossed, the length of the seat.

Others followed, disposing themselves in a go-as-you-please diversity of posture. One chose to sit astride the seat, amusing himself by jabbing his bowie into the wood. His neighbor sat with bowed back, resting a part of his weight on his hands, and while the tedium of confinement to one place by knocking his heels together. A third sat with elbows on knees, meditatively picking his teeth with a sliver that he had torn up from the floor.

"An' now," said Judge Dowd, "ef ary one knows anything about this hyar case, I reckon we're about ready to hyear it."

"Hold on, gents! Whar's yer distric' attorney an' yer counsel fur the defense? Ef ye're goin' fur to run sich a gilt-edged court, ye'd better go the hull figur!"

"I allow," said the judge, casting a piercing glance at the speaker, "that the Court will be counsel enough fur Jud Cowan, ef we ever git him in the dock yonder!"

"But, thunder 'n' Mars! ain't thar some one goin' fur to strike that thar jury? Blow my

skin ef that thar ain't jest about the hardest-lookin' crowd o' stool-pigeons I 'most ever see!"

"Haw! haw! haw! haw! Stand fur the prisoner yerself, old man!"

"O-o-o-h, yes! Jud Cowan, Esq.! Throw 'im up hyar, boys!"

"Look out, gents! Ef you put me on fur the prisoner, you might as well give up the idee of hangin' yer man! I had a ralative onc't that was janitor in a magistrate's office; so ye see I takes to the law nateral."

But the boys took the risk, and appointed Jud to "swap lies" with the judge in behalf of the prisoner.

He affected to look round the room, and then said:

"I'd strike the hull o' that jury, ef thar wa'n't sich an ornery lot to choose from in the crowd. I never noticed before that thar was so many scallawags out of jail!"

Witnesses were now sworn with owlish solemnity; but after that ceremony any one who chose asked questions and badgered them at pleasure. They were supposed to trust to their wits to protect themselves from this general on-set; and the "back talk" was not the least interesting part of the performance.

It was pretty clear that the unwritten law of the mountains justified the shooting of Billy Bucklew; but as there were no technicalities in the way of a thorough canvassing of Mr. Jack Sand in any and every relation, he was tried on the general issue.

Captain Plunkett aided in breaking the back of the capital charge; but this magnanimity made the boys all the more determined to "draw the line" at banishment.

They expressed their wishes without reserve, in a general talk, before the case was submitted to the jury.

Judge Dowd, having fortified himself with "three fingers straight," rose to charge the jury; but his rounded periods were unceremoniously clipped by a voice from the sovereign crowd.

"Let us hyear from Brother Thompson!"

"Brother Thompson! Brother Thompson!" came from all parts of the room, until the helpless judge was forced to yield.

"Waal, gents, what's the word?" asked the foreman, turning to his colleagues, without the ceremony of withdrawing; indeed, without any pretense to privacy.

"Pitch the trump yerself, Josh. I reckon you know as much about it as any one," said a com-
plaisant member of that distinguished body.

"How'll git do ye?"

"Git it is."

"So say you, all of you?" pursued Josh, with a vague recollection of the mummery of the Knights of something or other.

"Ay! ay!" was the assent.

Then the foreman got upon his feet.

"Waal, feller-citizens," he said, with a drawl, "the jury has sot onto the body of this hyar prisoner ontel it has begun to think that it's a good while between drinks! Ef ary gent has a mite o' terbacker, that might help out some. Thanks! Ef ye're agreeable, I'll pass it along. It appears from the evidence in this hyar case that Jack Sand is a mighty handy man with the pasteboards an' shootin'-irons. As fur as this hyar jury kin make out, that thar ain't no reason why a galoot should be in the way in an enterprisin' camp, as Cony Flat allows to be. We want men as has got go in 'em; but then ag'in, thar's sich a thing as bein' too fresh. Everybody knows an' respects Cap'n Plunkitt, which the same we hain't got a whiter man in the camp; an' the gent as goes fur buckin' ag'in' him strikes us all whar we live."

"Ain't that so, boys?"

"You're jest mighty right it is!"

"Them's our sentiments down to dots!"

"We're backin' Brother Thompson fur all we're worth!"

"Go on! go on! Your head's level!"

"Give him a rustler, boys! Hip! hip!"

And the room rung with the general indorsement of the foreman's presentation of the case.

Josh rolled his quid into the other cheek, gave a hitch to his trowsers, and went on:

"Wharfore, it is the verdict of this hyar jury that the aforesaid Jack Sand has got to git, at the least calculation."

This rendering was duly cheered, a voice crying out:

"An' lets him off dog-cheap at that!"

Jack looked pleasantly at the foreman, and asked:

"How long have I got, pardner?"

Josh, who had sat down, rose to his feet to say:

"I allow it's fur the court to do the senten-
cin'. This hyar jury ain't over-steppin' its ju-
risdiction, ye onderstand."

Jack turned with a faint smile to the judge.

"I reckon ef we don't find no obnoxious parties around after twelve o'clock, we'll hang the rope back on the peg," said that functionary, significantly.

Jack turned to the crowd.

"Boys," he said, "I'm bound to say that you've treated me like a gentleman. To show you that I don't bear any hard feelings toward Bony Flat, I ask you all, when the court has adjourned, to join me at the bar; and when you

have got as much as you want, to step outside and give the rest a chance."

"How's that?" cried one who was rather pleased by Jack's style. "We ain't proud—eh, boys?"

"Nary time!" was the hearty response. "A gent may make a mistake and yet be a gentleman!"

The disposition not to "bear down" on a man was thoroughly American; and the judge, having adjourned court, set the example of magnanimity by taking Jack's hand and going with him to the bar.

CHAPTER VI. GIT!

DURING the rest of the evening, a stranger would have thought Jack a favored guest of the camp. He had quite an ovation.

Now that it was decided that, like the heathen Chinee, he "must go," the ladies remembered what a good fellow he was, and transferred to him the sympathy which that morning had been called out for Billy Bucklew.

There seemed to be one exception to this. Nobody's Nell devoted herself to a couple of soldiers who belonged to Major Balfour's escort. She seemed to be in her most captivating mood, and they were evidently "gone."

This was the one drop of bitterness in Jack's cup.

"Heigho! that's the woman of it!" he said.

And she was saying to herself:

"What does he care? He will go away and never think of me again!"

Then her gayety became more reckless. She tipped the glasses of Messrs. Murdock and Schaeffer at her lips, and lighted their cigars, and waltzed with them till their heads were completely turned, and drank again.

They swore that she was without a peer for beauty and wit, and as they became maudlin made love to her, and then grew jealous of each other, to the point of fighting, but for her nice tact. She led them on and on, until they forgot their promises to their superior officer—forgot the duty that demanded clear heads and firm hands—forgot everything but the flash of her eyes, the touch of her hands, and her warm breath.

She "mixed" their drinks with the skill of one who knew to a nicety the effect of liquors and the various stages of intoxication.

Before midnight she had them snoring like the human swine they were.

As the hour of his departure drew near, Jack Sand had his horse, a slim-built chestnut, spirited, yet perfectly tractable, brought forth. All of his worldly effects were bestowed in capacious saddle-bags.

At the last moment, finding her without her soldiers, he approached Nobody's Nell.

"I seem to have lost your favor with the fall of my fortunes," he said, in a tone of politeness that thinly veiled a sneer.

"Oh! you haven't troubled yourself about me!" she replied, with a toss.

"You seemed so pleasantly engaged," he urged.

"When one is very much concerned, one doesn't stop at seemin'," she replied.

He caught her hand, with a sudden intensity of tone and look.

"Can we have been playing at cross-purposes?" he asked, almost passionately.

She drew her hand away, with a woman's momentary pique. She was not ready to forgive him all at once. Besides, if he really meant it, he would seek her out in spite of any risk to himself. She would put him to the test.

"Do you know what time it is?" she asked.

"Hang the time!" he cried. "Answer me!"

"I have nothing to answer you. You must go at once! You have not ten minutes."

"Nothing?—absolutely nothing?" he urged.

She felt that she had him. Her heart was singing with happiness. Then came a lover's anxiety for his safety.

"Nothing!" she repeated. "Go! go! See! there they come with the rope! They will not grant you a moment's grace!"

It was as she said. The jury appeared on the street in a body, with the foreman at their head.

Josh Thompson carried a coil of rope in his hand.

With a searching glance into the girl's face, which told him nothing except that she was nervous, as any woman might be under the circumstances, Jack dropped her hand, and walked up to the foreman of the jury.

"I want to thank you again for your courtesy," he said, extending his hand, which was not declined. "That's a very pretty piece of rope you have there. Will you allow me to examine it?"

"With all the pleasure in life. I should like to have you pass your opinion on it before it is put to use," replied Josh.

"It is admirably adapted to the purpose for which it is intended," said Jack, having passed it through his hands. "By the way, what time have you?"

Josh drew out his watch.

"Eight minutes of twelve," he said.

Jack looked at his own watch.

"I am half a minute ahead of you," he re-

plied. "We have time for a parting drink, if it is made a stirrup cup."

He called for the liquor and his bill.

"May Cony Flat never be run by a less gentlemanly crowd!" was his toast.

Then he mounted and rode out of the camp, accompanied by a cheering crowd, many of whom bore torches.

The ladies followed with those of sterner mold, waving their handkerchiefs. To them he had become a hero.

On the outskirts of the camp he raised his hat. The crowd responded with a final cheer.

Then he dug spurs into his horse's flanks, and dashed away into the darkness.

Josh Thompson drew out his watch.

"He has cleared it by less than thirty seconds!" he said, grimly.

The crowd now went to the Crystal Palace Saloon to finish the night.

Pat Croghan, sent in search of his comrades, found them in a state of beastly intoxication. He dragged them to the hotel stable one at a time, and then called the major to inspect them.

The officer was naturally in a rage.

"But we must go on!" he said. "Toss them into the back of the ambulance. Now is our time to get away unobserved, and before our departure is discovered we shall be safe at the post."

But where, meanwhile, was Blue-ruin Bob?

CHAPTER VII.

SLY SAM PUTS UP A "BLIND."

HAVING put matters in train at Cony Flat, it appeared to Blue-ruin Bob that nothing remained but to set their ambush and wait for their prey to walk into it.

Not so the more subtle Sam.

"The pins ain't half up yet, my simple-minded friend."

"What more's wantin'?"

"An alibi, if you please."

"An' how air we to git an alibi, I'd like to know?"

"How do ye git anything ye want? Make it!"

"Maybe you're used to that kind o' manufacture; but blow me ef I be!"

Sam developed his plan, of which the reader shall have the benefit presently.

"That's a purty good alibi," said Blue-ruin Bob, "all but one thing."

"What's the matter with it?"

"Why, as we don't strike the ambulance until after daylight—"

"The dickens we don't!"

"Didn't the major say five?"

"What an unlucky habit you have of believin' everything you hear!"

"Why shouldn't I believe that?"

"Because he said it, greeny!"

"What air ye tryin' to git through ye now?"

"It ain't what I'm tryin' to git through me, but through you—with a dog-gone slim show!"

"Waal, what air ye tryin' to git through me, then?"

"Ef you had that thar grip-sack, would you make it a point to tell all the boys jest when it went out on the road?"

"Maybe I wouldn't."

"You're mighty right you wouldn't! An' you may bet the major is as sharp as you be."

"Waal, ef he don't pull out at five, maybe you know when he does."

"You bet your life I do! The minute he said five, I knowed it was a blind. Why? Because they would be ready by that time without his sayin' anything about it. So I hangs around until I hears him bind them soldiers to be on hand at one sharp."

"By thunder, Sam! your top-knot is worth somethin', it is!"

"Have you just found that out?"

"No, I hain't; an' that's a fact!"

As the candidate for alcalde, it was in order for Blue-ruin Bob to "swing round the circle," ordering the best that was to be had for his constituents, and having the score put "on the slate."

Before midnight he and Sly Sam manifested all signs of a "drunk" that would not wear off until morning at least.

In pursuance of Sam's plan, they had attached to themselves a "stool-pigeon," one Jimmy McIntyre, who had passed through all the stages, from rollicking good-fellowship to boastful pretensions as the possessor of stupendous wealth (in the near future!) and of as wondrous prowess in the (fabulous) past, to pugnacity that waited not upon provocation, to a driveling love for everybody, to a morbid craving for sympathy in his hard luck, and finally to that hiccupping boosiness which precedes the snoring sleep of the human hog!

Then mine host of the Hardscrabble took it upon himself to say:

"Look a-hyar, Bob, you'd better go to bed. You've been celebratin' enough for one night."

"Tha's all right! Tha's all right!" mumbled Bob. "Give us'nuther all roun'. Step up, zhents! Hyar'zh—hyar'zh—Hic!"

"Take him home and put him to bed, Sam."

"You zhes' bet I will! Come 'long, ole man! We'zh goin'—hic!—we'zh goin' 'er bed, thar'zh whar we'zh goin'!"

And linking his arm through that of his su-

perior on one side and of Jimmy McIntyre on the other, he marched them off, looking back over his shoulder at the crowd, and inviting them with a stupid smile:

"Come on, boyzh! Le'sh all go 'er bed!"

The crowd was quick to "catch on" to the humor of the thing.

"Hooray, fellers!" shouted one of their number. "Let's tuck 'em in their trundle-beds!"

And amid hoarse guffaws and the bandying of such wit as occurred to their rude imaginations, the crowd poured after the seeming inebriates, yelling and singing and firing their revolvers into the air, anything to increase the hubbub.

Arrived at Blue-ruin Bob's shanty, as many of the crowd as could forced their way in, while the others continued the bedlam without, the demonstration having taken the character of a charivari, upon one of the bacchanals shouting:

"Boys, we'll have to sing 'em to sleep! Give 'em a lullaby as is a lullaby!"

Meanwhile, within had been struck a light—a tallow dip which in its previous burning had guttered into fantastic shapes.

The dull red flame disclosed a room in nothing different from the hundred other miners' huts in the place. Kegs of blasting-powder, fuses, coils of rope, and various tools and articles of clay-daubed clothing were scattered about. A carbine stood in the corner, with a belt of cartridges hung over its muzzle. Smoke-begrimed cooking-utensils, battered and with handles, noses and lids wanting, littered the hearth of the rude fireplace. A rough deal table, black with grease and dirt, and on which unwashed tin plates and cups and scraps of cold food and bread-crumbs made unsightly confusion, was nailed against the wall. An equally rude bunk, filled with mountain moss covered with gray army blankets, awaited the return of its occupant just as he had taken leave of it in the morning.

Into this last Jimmy McIntyre was tumbled without ceremony, heedless that his feet were where his head ought to be.

"Come! In with the rest of you!" cried one of the laughing crowd, laying hands next on the proprietor of the "shebang."

But Blue-ruin Bob, while balancing himself on heels and toes, and hiccupping spasmodically, made profane objection.

"Hold on, gents! That thar bunk wasn't calculated to hold more'n two; an' hang me ef I propose to consort with that thar hog, anyway!"

"Oh, gammon! You won't half fill it! That's a six-sided bunk, that is."

"Six-sided —"

"I'll leave it to the crowd! Front-side, back-side, top-side, bottom-side, inside, outside. What's the matter with that?"

"Boss, you're so handy at figgers, you'd better go into politics an' let yourself out by the day as a returnin' board—you had!"

"Put him out! He's too smart fur this community!"

"Wrap his head up in terbacker-juice an' mulle'n-leaves!"

"He must be a runaway bank-teller!"

"They put him through a six-years' course at Sing Sing College. That's what's the matter with him!"

"Shut off yer gas-works, thar, an' tell these hyar gents whar they're goin' to sleep!"

"Jimmy McIntyre comes out o' hyar, fur one thing!" declared Blue-ruin Bob, beginning to pull at him.

Affecting extreme drunkenness, he fell upon the really besotted sleeper, and then giving a lurch, fell over backward, dragging him half-way out of the bunk.

"Oh, cheese it, Bob!" growled Sly Sam. "I ain't too proud to bunk with Jimmy. We'll take the front an' back sides; an' ef you're so particklar, you kin have the other four sides to yourself."

He thereupon crept over Jimmy's body, and disposed himself next the wall, where he straightway fell to snoring.

But Bob, with a drunken man's obstinacy, insisted upon the removal of the objectionable occupant. So the boys dragged him out and rolled him under the bunk, where he seemed quite as content as before.

Bob was then helped into the bunk, growling that his bed-fellow took up the better part of the room.

But his discontent seem short-lived, for almost as soon as his head touched the pillow—metaphorically speaking!—he joined the nasal trio.

Then the light was put out, and with a final howl the boys departed.

The dying away of their voices showed that they were returning to their usual amusements, having exhausted the fun to be got out of this situation.

The doorways of the saloons, streaming their red light into the blackness of the street, like the mouths of burning pits into which these abandoned mortals were plunging to the final torments, had scarcely swallowed them up when the cunning knaves who had duped them slipped from their shanties and hied them away to their bloody enterprise.

They did not take their horses, since the ani-

mals were not necessary to their purpose, and their absence from the brush lean-to at the back of the shanty would be discovered and lead to an investigation, which would betray the fact that the supposed drunkards were no longer in their bunk. As it was, Jimmy McIntyre was doing duty in the way of snoring for the three.

The night promised to be a most villainous one. They had hardly left the camp behind when the storm broke.

Making their way to a deep gully at the foot of a long grade, they found an old patriarch of the forest which, having been broken off near the ground in its last bout with the storm-wind, had been saved from complete overthrow by lodging in the branches of a sturdy young descendant.

Taking over his shoulder two coils of rope, one of which had been brought hither by Bob and the other by himself, Sam proceeded to climb the younger tree. Arrived at their juncture, he tied one to either bole, and dropped the other ends to the ground. Then, with the facility of a sailor, he slid down these lines.

The free ends were now carried in opposite directions, and tied to other tree-trunks, and the prospective road-agents began to sway upon one of them.

A cracking of branches overhead showed that their labors were not without effect.

Then, with a tremendous crash, the monarch of a thousand years fell to earth, a fatal obstruction to the approaching ambulance.

"Now let 'em come!" growled Blue-ruin Bob, grimly.

But Sam, who never lost sight of "business," said:

"The quicker we git these ropes coiled down, ready to be carted off, so's not to give away how that tree come whar it is, the less chance thar'll be of our gittin' caught at our tricks."

This suggestion was acted upon—none too soon; for the ropes were hardly in place before the rattle of an approaching vehicle was borne to the ears of the robbers during a lull in the tempest.

"Thar they come!" cried Sly Sam.

"We're ready fur 'em!" responded Blue-ruin Bob. "Now, mind yer eye, an' we'll bag that grip-sack!"

He sprang across the road to the side opposite his colleague. Then nothing was to be seen or heard save battling nature.

CHAPTER VIII.

A HORROR OF THE NIGHT.

FOR some distance Major Balfour sat in stern silence, listening to the drunken snoring of the men in the bottom of the ambulance at his back.

Pat Croghan was too good a soldier to intrude upon his superior.

Finally the major spoke:

"It's a black night, Pat."

"It'll be worse before it's betther, sor."

A chill, damp blast of wind came sweeping down the canyon, and a growl of thunder up among the peaks emphasized his prognostic.

"A bad night for an attack," pursued the major, gloomily.

"Ye're right tha-ur, sor, wid thim spalpeens no good to uz at all, at all."

Major Balfour avoided any reference to his derelict subordinates.

"Do you suppose we got away without attracting attention?"

"That we did, unless some wan was an the lookout fur uz. The divils were crazy wid carousin'."

"We are following in the wake of that fellow whom they ran out of camp."

"He's only wan. The two av uz are good fur the loike av him anny day!"

"Keep an ear open in the rear. If we find that we are followed, we will abandon the ambulance and carry the grip-sack into the woods. Pat, I'd rather lose my life than the money, after what has happened. If I am shot, I depend upon you to look out for the sachel, and get to the post with it."

"That you may, sor. Faith, I'd carry it in me teeth, a-walkin' an me hon's an' knees, before yer honor sh'u'd be blamed fur the doin's o' yan omadhauns."

"Take advantage of every decent piece of road to make the best time you can."

"I've me to do that, sor."

A blinding flash of lightning rent the heavens, causing the mules to rear and paw the air. Then came the crash and reverberating echoes, followed by a swash of water driven before the wind.

The team galloped down the grade into the gully where a mountain torrent would soon be rushing across the road.

The light of the lamps glinted on the rain-drops, and illuminated the road sufficiently to enable the mules to keep the track and avoid stepping into holes.

Suddenly Pat Croghan shouted:

"Look out, sor!"

Then Major Balfour saw the mules leap over some obstruction; and the next instant followed a crash and a bound of the vehicle that nearly threw him from his seat.

His thought was that a tree had blown down across the road; and in clutching to save him-

self, he let go his rifle, which was thrown forward over the dashboard.

A second crash, as the hind wheels struck the obstacle, was followed by a general collapse of the vehicle.

He saw faithful Pat Croghan jerked out over the dashboard by the lines, in his vain attempt to hold the frightened mules; and realized that the fore wheels had been wrenched from under the wagon-box.

He himself would have been thrown out, but for his firm grip on one of the supports to the top of the ambulance.

At the same instant he was undeceived as to the cause of the catastrophe.

A rapid succession of rifle-shots, followed by a groan from poor Pat, and a sharp twinge of pain in his own shoulder, told him that his worst fears were realized.

His first thought was his reputation as a soldier. Life came after honor! He clutched the grip-sack, and scrambled out of the wreck. He must trust to his revolvers, but principally to his heels.

When the front of the ambulance went to the ground, tossing the hind wheels into the air and then falling over sideways, the lamps were extinguished; but by a flash of lightning Blue-ruin Bob saw the major issue from the wreck, with the precious grip-sack in his hand, and make for cover.

"There he goes! After him!" he shouted, and himself bounded in pursuit.

He had a dark-lantern slung to his belt, which he often found serviceable in this night work. He detached it, and drawing the slide, carried it at arm's-length at one side of his body, so that a shot at the lantern would not find him in range.

By its light he could see not only his way, but the man of whom he was in pursuit.

At this fatal disadvantage Major Balfour knew that flight was hopeless. He therefore turned and fired—not at his pursuer, for he was shrewd enough to know that the position of the light was no guide to his body, but at the bull's-eye lens. His first need was darkness.

But the bobbing motion of the lantern, as its bearer ran, made it a difficult thing to hit; and he missed his aim.

An oath came from unseen lips, the lantern stopped, and an instantaneous flash showed where the pursuer was.

But as he fired a second time, Major Balfour felt as if some one had struck him a blow in the breast, a bloody mist appeared before his eyes, and he was dimly conscious of stumbling backward.

Then all sensibility was blotted out. That was the last he knew of earth!

In an instant his implacable enemy was upon him.

"Curse you! I've got you at last!" he growled, with the savage hatred of the murderer for his victim. "I'll fix you so that you won't have no notion o' squealin'!"

And placing his revolver to the temple of the fallen man, he fired a shot into his brain.

Then he clutched the grip-sack, with a chuckle of triumph.

"This hyar's what we're all after! We'll salt you down whar no investigatin' committee won't never nose you out, me jolly boys!"

Returning to the coach, he found Pat Croghan lying in the road, bleeding from a wound in the breast. His ghastly face and the blue glaze on his half-closed eyes showed that he was past all human medicament.

Sly Sam was standing near the coach.

"What shall we do with these galoots?" he asked. "They're dead drunk. I shouldn't wonder if Nell drugged 'em, to make sure. She's a boss, I tell you!"

Blue-ruin Bob threw the light of his lantern over the wreck.

The ambulance lay on its side. One hind wheel had been torn off, and the top was broken.

Schaeffer lay under the wreck, with an ugly bruise on the head and the side of his face. Murdock had been thrown out, and lay apparently unconscious, either from the effects of the liquor he had drank, or from the shock.

"They're dead drunk, ef they ain't shammin'," growled Blue-ruin Bob, suspiciously. "We don't want to take no chances on this thing, ye understand. It's these chicken-hearted fellers that gits sold. Dead men tell no tales! That thar's my motto. A slug apiece whar they live won't hurt 'em none."

He drew his revolver, so as to make sure work of them as he had of Major Balfour.

Sly Sam, with little if any more humanity, had a vein of superstition in him that might have served the inebriates, if he had been alone.

"Hold on, boss!" he cried, with a restraining hand on Bob's arm. "It's bad luck to slug into a man that hain't his senses about him to know that you're goin' to swing him over to the other side."

"Bad nonsense!" growled Bob, shaking off his hand. "It's blasted foolishness to give a man a chance to blow on ye."

And he deliberately cocked the weapon and put it at Schaeffer's head.

"Hark!" warned Sam sharply, again catching Bob by the arm.

"Let up, you confounded fool! What air ye tryin' to git through ye?" demanded Bob, surly.

"Wait fur another lull in the wind. Somebody's comin'!"

Blue-ruin Bob waited, with a very poor grace.

The wind fell, and then came to them the regular clatter of hoofs.

"Yer knife! yer knife!" cried Bob, drawing his own. "We can't risk a shot; but these galoots have got to be put beyond the reach o' blabbin'!"

Sly Sam hesitated, shuddering.

"Curse you fur a white-livered sneak!" growled Blue-ruin Bob, and finished the bloody work himself.

They then sprung to cover, and the horseman came on at a reckless pace, considering the fact that he could scarcely see his hand before his face.

"If he drops to that thing, so much the worse fur him!" growled Bob. "We may have to finish him off, too."

CHAPTER IX.

THE FOOL O' FIDDLER'S FOLLY.

THE rider must have placed great reliance in the sagacity of his horse, or been quite reckless of his own safety.

"Steady! steady, old girl!" he said, as the animal swerved out of the direct line; but he had the good sense not to use the rein to enforce on the brute his own idea of the right way.

He had momentary evidence that he had adopted the wiser course; for the mare vaulted over some obstruction which was quite indistinguishable to her rider's eye. Then she returned to the middle of the road and kept on, splashing through the gullies that scored it in every direction and the turbid streams that filled every depression, as, ever ascending or descending, it twisted about like a serpent in agony.

In the darkness Jack Sand had taken the wrong road, and so lost enough time to bring him behind the men he had preceded out of Cony Flat. He now passed the wreck without discovering it.

Further on he descried a fitful flickering light against the face of a cliff, and upon riding up, found a camp-fire with two men crouching between it and a shelving rock, which sheltered them and it from the drenching rain.

They were the hardest-looking specimens of the tramp order he had ever seen, even in that land of the "busted."

One wore a felt hat, with a hole in the crown and the brim torn away, all but five or six inches, which formed a sort of visor, giving the whole the appearance of a dilapidated cap. A ragged coat, with one skirt torn off—a wretchedly-soiled shirt of the material called "hickory"—baggy trowsers supported by one suspender, which was neither more nor less than a bit of rope—boots, run over at the heels and with the uppers gaping from the soles;—such was the toilet of one, over whom the other had nothing to boast. A shock of red hair, a tuft of which stuck up through the hole in the crown of his hat, and a mop of tangled whiskers, almost hid his face. A narrow strip of forehead, a pair of bleared and bloodshot eyes, and a lumpy nose, adorned with "rum-blossoms" from the midst of which sprung a lot of bristling hairs, were all that was visible.

The other had black hair and whiskers, and was "pot-bellied" and so "soaked" that he seemingly never emerged from a state of dreaminess.

A few minutes before Jack Sand came upon them, those two beauties had been sleeping as sweetly as the babes in the woods, the first-described, Eucher-deck Pardee, having his feet in the stomach of his Ole Pard.

They were roused by the runaway mules tearing past with the fore wheels of the ambulance at their heels.

"Waal, I swar, ole man," mumbled Eucher-deck, "thar's been lively doin's up the road; but that thar ain't no money out of our pockets."

The old pard made no reply. He seldom roused himself sufficiently for words, but sat rocking and pitching very like a buoy in a tempestuous sea, blinking his eyes stupidly.

"Lay down, ole man," said his partner. "The ole fel' hain't come fur ye this time."

"Gimme suthin'!" pleaded the old soaker.

Eucher-deck Pardee drew a bottle from his pocket, looked into it, inverted it over his own mouth, looked into it again, and then answered:

"Ain't nothin' but the bung-hole."

"Gi's 'e bung-hole, then! Whazh 'er ma'er wizh yer?" was the indignant demand.

Eucher-deck Pardee passed the bottle over, and watched his partner solicitously, to see if he could extract anything from its emptiness.

The Ole Pard aimed at his mouth, but struck all round the bull's-eye. He persevered with great patience, until success at last crowned his efforts. Then he sucked away with his eyes shut, every instant threatening to lurch over into the fire, but as often regaining his balance.

He might have kept on thus indefinitely, had not Eucher-deck Pardee taken the bottle out of his hands, and pushed him over.

He made no protest, but straightway fell to snoring.

Eucher-deck sat for some time staring meditatively from the empty bottle to the fire; but finally rolled over, put his feet in the Ole Pard's stomach, and addressed himself once more to the drowsy god.

He was just dozing off, when Jack Sand dashed up.

"Hallo, hyere, you old reprobates!" he cried, leaping to the ground, and extending his hands over the fire. "Haven't you any more comfortable quarters than these?"

"An' who air you?" demanded Eucher-deck Pardee, suspiciously.

He looked at the slouch hat, at the dripping cloak that fell almost to the horseman's feet, at the revolvers, a glimpse of which he caught when the wind gave the cloak a flirt, at the face and eyes of the stranger; and he said to himself that this combination was not unsuited to a dashing road-agent.

"Ef you don't find what suits hyar," he went on, "keep a-goin', an' leave no regrets behind ye!"

"You surly old curmudgeon!" cried Jack. "Maybe it will tax your good-nature too much to tell how far I am from Red Dump."

"Two miles, I reckon."

"Two miles further in this devil's stir-about! Is there no hut nearer than that, where a stranger can get a little whiter welcome than you seem disposed to give to your hole in the hill?"

"This hyar suits me an' my pard," said Eucher-deck Pardee. "Maybe you'd druther bunk with The Fool."

"The fool? What fo'?"

"The Fool o' Fiddler's Folly."

"What? An idiot?"

"Waal, I allow it's an idjit what spends his time fiddlin', when other men is takin' out the rocks by the cart-load all round him—ain't it?"

"Well, that depends. Where can I find his shanty?—if it is nearer than two miles."

"Do ye mind the pine that sticks out over the road, from a cleft fifty feet ur so up the rock?"

"I'm a stranger in this section."

"Waal, ye kin see it ag'in' the sky, ef ye keep yer eye peeled."

"I'll do so. Drive ahead."

"Take the fu'st bridle-path to the left arter ye pass under the pine."

Eucher-deck Pardee coolly lay down again, as if to indicate that the interview, as far as he was concerned, need proceed no further.

Jack Sand laughed, took the hint, mounted his horse, and dashed away again into the tempestuous night, in due course reaching a lone shanty in a desolate gorge.

"Hallo, pardner!" he cried, rapping on the door with his riding-whip.

There was no response.

He leaped to the ground, muttering:

"A deuced inhospitable set! Well, I'll be hanged if I go a step further, if I have to pitch the tenant out, to get lodgins for myself and Fairy."

He unceremoniously thrust the door open.

"Hallo, within!" he cried again. "Do you keep a man and a Christian waiting out in such a night as this?"

Still no response.

"By Jove! I believe the place is unoccupied."

He went in. There were embers on the hearth, which showed that some one made it his abode; but there was no one present either to welcome him or to dispute his entrance.

"Very well! We'll take possession! In with you, my beauty!"

And the horse obeyed as if trained to follow his slightest gesture.

He made the animal lie down in the middle of the room, and then threw some wood on the embers.

As it blazed up, he looked about.

The shanty was rudely built and scantily furnished, even for a miner's hut. The bed was only a rough bunk, filled with mountain moss, and covered with an army blanket. The fireplace was daubed with mud. An iron pot, a long-handled frying-pan, a smoke-blackened coffee-pot—these, with two or three pans intended for washing gold-bearing sand, were all that could be called cooking utensils. A candle-box stood on end and was the only thing that suggested a seat, while a packing-case seemed to serve the purposes of a table and larder combined.

In a corner stood a pick and shovel, and against the wall hung some rough wearing-apparel. Jack also noticed an old green bag.

"That, I suppose, is the fiddle," he said.

However, he was too much of a gentleman to meddle; so that remained problematic for the present.

Removing his dripping clothes, and hanging them on pegs on either side of the fireplace, Jack took a ruffled night-shirt from his saddle-bags, and was soon occupying the stranger's bed.

He was just beginning to doze, when he was roused by the sound of approaching footsteps.

The door opened. A man stamped the mud

from his boots on the threshold, and then entered.

"Hallo, friend!" cried Jack, nonchalantly. "It looks as if I had turned you out of your bed."

The man closed the door and walked forward into the room, noticing the horse as well as his master, before he replied.

When he found voice, he spoke in dull, monotonous tones, without a trace of annoyance.

"You are welcome," he said, and then walked up to the fire, and extended his hands over the blaze.

Jack studied his broad back with more interest than he usually gave to a man, unless he was playing cards with him.

The Fool o' Fiddler's Folly—for it was doubtless he—was a man of perhaps forty years of age, with a frame which in his early manhood must have been athletic, but which was now bowed, as with long years of melancholy wandering with the eyes on the ground. Neither hair nor beard could have known shears or razor for years; for the one floated on his shoulders and half-way down his back, like a woman's, while the other depended to his waist. They were light brown in color, and of fine texture. When his hat was off, the parting of his hair in the middle gave to his face a peculiarly saintly expression. His eyes were blue. He had a long, straight nose. His mouth was hidden beneath his mustache. His voice was low and soft.

He wore a slouch hat, and had an army blanket wrapped about his shoulders. For the rest, his dress differed in nothing from the ordinary dress of the mines. However, it was cleanly.

Having removed his hat and blanket, he took down the green bag, drew forth a violin, with what seemed to Jack an affectionate touch, and leaning against the rude chimney, began to play Annie Laurie.

He had not played half a dozen bars before it appeared that he was a musician of altogether exceptional quality. Jack had never heard such exquisite pathos thrown into musical execution. The instrument wailed with an almost human anguish.

The performer was evidently forgetful of his guest, indeed entirely oblivious to his surroundings. Whither was his fancy borne on the wings of that sad strain? What did he see in the smoldering embers?

Jack listened in wonder, until sleep closed his eyelids, and he dreamed a weird phantasmagoria, through which the Fool o' Fiddler's Folly flitted in an ever-shifting drama with a woman with disheveled hair and sad eyes, and a voice that had caught the minor strains of the violin.

CHAPTER X.

ULSTER JOHNNY.

"HALLO, Jim! What d'ye call that *thar* thing?"

"Waal, I'll be blowed!"

"Is it alive? Does it breathe? Haw! haw! haw!"

"Darned ef I'll ever tell ye! Let's sample the dog-goned critter, anyhow."

"It's a rare 'un, boss! It 'ud take the assayer to size it up, an' tell whether it is fish, flesh, ur fowl."

"Come on! This hyar galoot's worth a circus."

And abandoning their work, the speakers fell in, in single file, behind the man who was the butt of their ridicule.

He was unusual enough in appearance to excite comment in a mining-town, where any departure from the regulation slouch hat, woolen shirt, and trousers tucked into boots, makes a man conspicuous.

His opera hat, standing collar and cuffs, which implied a "b'iled shirt," though it was at present hidden by a gaudy neck-handkerchief, from the folds of which blazed a solitary diamond, even his kid gloves might have "gone down" with only a grimace. But when it came to an ulster—Well, the boys had to draw the line somewhere!

A tourist's field-glass rested on his hip, supported by a strap from his shoulder; and he carried a slender rod of iron-wood as a cane.

As Blue-ruin Bob and Jimmy McIntyre fell into his wake, keeping step with him, and walking so close that Bob nearly touched him, he glanced at them with a half-smile of curious interest, but kept on with no manifestation of annoyance.

"Left! left! I left a good home when I left!" shouted Blue-ruin Bob, with his elbows bent so as to bring his fists up to his shoulders, in the posture of a pedestrian, while he exaggerated all of his movements, fetching his left foot down with a pronounced stamp.

As an accompaniment to this rude chant, Jimmy McIntyre swung his hat, and roared:

"Hay-foot! straw-foot! Hay-foot! straw-foot! He! he! he! he! he! he! Fall in hyar, fools! This hyar's the great original ring-tailed What-is-it, jest escaped from Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth! It was imported at great expense; an' when 'fust took from its native jungle, it had to be kep' in a cage with an iron col-

lar around its neck; but tamin' it has put it in sich delicate health that the management has had to git a glass case fur it. Instid o' tearin' human flesh, as it used to do in the wilds of Afriky, it now feeds on rose leaves, an' is sprinkled with ody-cologne night an' mornin'! Fall right in hyar, an' show the What-is-it that Red Dump ain't no sich slouch of a place as New York an' Chicargo an' Saint Loui' an' them one-hoss towns what he's used to in the States."

The rough humor of the mining-camp was not slow to "catch on" to this sport. Loungers flocked from every direction; and before he had gone the length of one street of Red Dump, the stranger had a long queue following after him, guying him mercilessly.

Instead of being annoyed, he seemed to enjoy the thing with them. He walked the length of the street, and then turned so as to pass them on the countermarch. He smiled at their chaff, but did not reply. So far, indeed, he had not said a word.

As he approached the Hardscrabble Hotel—a name with which the proprietor had not christened the chief hostelry of Red Dump!—there were twenty or thirty in line, to be cheered by the crowd that had not been in time to join them.

Dan Powers, mine host of the Hardscrabble, stood before his door, with a broad grin on his fat face, ready to receive his guest.

"Why didn't you say that you had this natural curiosity with ye?" he asked of Tom Dunn, the driver of the east-bound stage, who had but a few minutes before "rounded up" to the door with an empty "hearse."

"Fur the best reason in the world," replied Dunn. "Because he wasn't with me! Do you think I drive a menagerie about the country?"

This sally was received with a shout of laughter.

"How did he git hyar, then?" asked Powers. "He'll tell you himself, no doubt. Maybe the hand-organ man will be along shortly."

"Oh, go 'long! You're too funny to work fur what you git out o' the stage company. Why don't you hire yourself out fur a clown at once?"

"Livin' at the Hardscrabble has kept me too spare in flesh!" retorted Tom, and "got" the landlord that time.

"Do you think I'm throwin' away good grub tryin' to fatten sich a long-geared, slab-sided, limber-jointed, knock-kneed, splay-footed, camel-backed, cave-bellied, big-mouthed, goggle-eyed, flap-eared, lantern-jawed—"

But Dan's genius for vituperative epithet was "called" by the arrival of his ulstered guest.

"Ah, landlord!" he exclaimed, as he entered the laughing crowd. "You have a very humorous community here."

"The hardest nuts in the foot-hills, ef you was to rake 'em with a fine-tooth comb, from British America to Mexico!" said Dan, with a grin.

"May I trouble you to take my—ah—ulstah? Thanks!"

And this "fresh" young man added his hat, and his under coat, and his cuffs, which he removed daintily.

Dan was so thunderstruck by this unusual proceeding—making a clothes-horse of him—that he stared, submitting to be laden.

The expression of his face, however, was a study for his delighted friends. At first it was only blank with amazement; then he flushed; then he grew pale with indignation. He was just getting in a deep breath to launch a volley of red-hot oaths at his cool guest, when something occurred which changed his entire state of feeling toward him.

With the quickness of lightning the stranger whirled round upon the crowd who stood in open-mouthed expectancy.

Then, before any one had the slightest intimation of what he was about to do, his fist shot straight out from the shoulder; and Blue-ruin Bob went to grass—like a log!

This feat was received with a shout of astonishment, which, ere it was concluded, turned into a cry of dismay, then of warning, and ended in a laugh of wild delight.

The cause of this shifting emotion was the development of Ulster Johnny's purpose.

Without pause he caught Jimmy McIntyre off his feet, whirled him into the air, and sent him crashing down upon his fallen principal.

Sly Sam, who had the fortune to stand third in the "procesh," was seized by the shoulder, tripped up, and with a quick jerk thrown upon the pile.

By this time the crowd was scattering in all directions, falling over each other in their hurry, and uttering a medley of cries.

"Whoop! What's broke loose?"

"Thunder an' lightnin'! he's an airtquake!"

"Haw! haw! haw! Cl'ar the track! He won't leave nothin' o' this hyar camp but a grease-spot an' a pa'r o' gallusses!"

"Wake snakes! Ain't he a rusher?"

"Oh! swap me off fur two-bits'-worth o' nowhars!"

"The blowedest sell—"

"An' still he ain't happy!"

Amidst which Ulster Johnny was showing what kind of metal he was made of.

He seemed to be all arms and legs, and to be everywhere at once. No one could be quite sure

that he was beyond his reach. And every man he touched went to add to the heap.

He had half a dozen in a pile before those about him were beyond the sweep of his arms, and so quickly that none of those down could make an effort to scramble to their feet. Then he pinned them together by putting his foot on the topmost.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, smiling blandly upon the crowd, "you see that I like fun as well as the next man. I am happy to have struck such a funny camp."

"Fur marcy's sake! whar did you come from?" cried an astonished miner, who, having pushed his hat on the back of his head, stood staring at the man who had "panned out" so different from what had been expected.

Ulster Johnny smiled.

"I reckon it's enough for you to know that I'm here," he said.

"Hang me ef you ain't right, stranger!" assented the other. "An' thar ain't no mistake about yer bein' hyar, nuther, you bet! Them thar galoots has l'arnt that thar fact fur rocks! Hyar's fur ye as long as ye stay; an' no questions asked an' it's Injun Sid as says it!"

And with keen admiration in his glance the speaker extended his hand.

Ulster Johnny took it as frankly as it was offered.

"I am glad to accept your friendship," he said.

"An' ef these hyar galoots don't swaller their gruel peaceable—"

"They will," interrupted Ulster Johnny, with quiet confidence.

Then turning to the men who were getting out of the tangle in which he had put them, he added, cheerfully:

"No malice, boys! You bit off a little more than you bargained for; but it's all right—eh?"

"Boss, fur one I hain't got nothin' to say!" replied a good-natured one. "Only, ef you're took that thar way often, jest tie yerself down tell I git cl'ar o' the county!"

"When a man goes pig-stealin'," he calculates on the critter's squeal, an' takes his chances o' gittin' ketched," was another's acceptance of the situation.

"And what say you, friend?" asked Ulster Johnny, putting his hand on Blue-ruin Bob's shoulder.

He had got upon his feet with a sullen frown. It was plain that he was hurt in spirit as well as in body.

He looked into Ulster Johnny's smiling face with no relaxation of his grim displeasure.

"I say it's all right tell it comes my turn to down you!" he replied.

"Very well," said Johnny. "When you think you see your chance, go in."

With assured nonchalance he turned to the host of the Hardscrabble.

"I am indebted to you, friend, for—"

"Don't mention it!" interrupted Powers. "Whenever you want a sponge-holder, jest you call on yours-truly. But I say, boss," he added, in a lowered tone, as he followed Blue-ruin Bob's retreating figure with no friendly glance, "that thar's an ugly dog. Look out fur him!"

"Thank you! I look out for everybody. But if you will set 'em up for the boys at my expense—"

There was no need of concluding the sentence. Such orders were too common to require full statement at every recurrence.

With appreciative smiles and ejaculations of good-will, the crowd jostled into the bar, where they did full justice to Ulster Johnny's generosity.

Neither last nor least frequent in their demands on the bar were two whom we have seen before—no less distinguished persons than Eucher-deck Pardee and his old pard. Shreds of mountain moss clinging here and there about their clothes and in their hair showed how they had "bunked," and their boots were burdened with the yellow clay of the mountain roads; while tobacco-juice defiled their beards, and a rank odor of whisky and garlic exhaled from their frowzy persons.

"Ole fell!" hiccupped Eucher-deck, "who's this hyar gay an' festive swell what is so flush with his ducats?"

"Wha's that got to do with the w'isky?" asked the old pard.

"Maybe it's blood-money as pays fur it," suggested Eucher-deck.

"All right," assented the old pard. "Zanythin' in that to turn a man's stummick? Pass erlong er bottle, will ye?"

"It's the galoot as follered up them mules," persisted Eucher-deck.

But the old pard, with his lips glued to the mouth of a bottle, was too far gone in bliss to pay any further heed.

It was as Eucher-deck said. Ulster Johnny and the elegant Mr. Jack Sand were one and the same.

He had taken this peculiar method of entering the camp to distinguish himself at the outset; and his ingenuity was rewarded with eminent success. From the moment that he "plowed the ground" with Blue-ruin's nose and piled his crowd upon him, he was "cock of the walk" in Red Dump.

This was evidenced by the following speech from Sid Colton, the mine-boss of the Pan-handle Lode:

"We air jest on the p'int of electin' an alcalde, an' what we want is a man to run ag'in' Blue-ruin Bob—a mighty hard citizen, I kin tell ye, an' carryin' the tough element o' this hyar camp in his breeches pocket. Now you have struck jest the right lead to ring in the boys, an' make 'em enthuse; an' with the backin' we kin give ye, you're sure to carry the thing with a scream!"

"But, gentlemen," objected Jack, modestly, "I am a perfect stranger to you all."

"That don't make no manner of difference. You'll do. Will ye run?"

"Why, of course, I am in the hands of my friends," replied Jack, in the stereotyped phrase of the would-be modest politician who is, "tickled to death" at the chance.

"It's a go, then!" was the ready clinching of the matter, and after a drink—without which ceremony nothing can be done in the mines—the party scattered to advertise the new candidate.

At the announcement the wildest enthusiasm sprung up, and Jack Sand was loaded with congratulations and assurances of universal support.

But Blue-ruin Bob's partisans, who thus far had been jubilant over the undisputed prospects of their "man," frowned blackly and swore loudly.

"You'll never put that thar chicken over Bob!" declared one, with more of a menace in his look than in his words.

"If you've got any money that says so," was the quick retort, "you won't have fur to look fur takers."

"He'd better keep his weather eye peeled, ef he tries it on."

"You bet you don't ketch his kind asleep! He's rubbed Bob's nose in the dirt once, and he kin do it ag'in'!"

"Ef he don't git six inches o' cold steel tucked under his jacket!"

"Whenever you think you feel like that sort of thing, just let yourself out!"

In this sort of phrase was the canvass conducted. The men knew each other's methods too well to affect any disguise.

The most extravagant bets were offered and taken by the confident partisans, who never hesitated to "back" their opinions with their money.

In the midst of the excitement the west-bound stage drove up, and at the window appeared the face of a young girl, gazing with wondering curiosity out upon the motley crowd.

Half a dozen men, with the sincere though rude gallantry of a country where women are rare, sprung to open the door, and stood hat in hand for her to alight.

But they were momentarily disappointed, for she was preceded by a man so shattered in health as to be peevish, and so broken in spirit that he seemed to shrink within himself with apprehension as he crept through the door, while his restless eyes ran over the crowd as if fearful of finding some familiar and dreaded face.

His worst fears were apparently realized, for he abruptly stopped with his foot on the step, and every muscle became rigid, and his eyes set and glassy.

So marked was the effect that the crowd turned to see what had so frozen him with horror.

In their midst stood the Fool o' Fiddler's Folly, his face as ghastly as that of a corpse, his eyes fixed upon the face of the girl at the stage window.

Before they had time to speculate as to the cause of his emotion, their attention was recalled to the coach by a shriek of terror, and in that unreasoning panic which borders upon madness the invalid leaped back into the stage, cowering at the feet of the girl—apparently his daughter—and actually burying his face in her dress, like a frightened child.

"Back! back! For God's sake don't let your face be seen!" he cried. "We are lost—lost!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE ARM OF THE LAW.

INSTEAD of obeying his warning, the girl, while putting her arms about him as if to protect him, stared out of the coach window at the strange man who seemed to take such an interest in herself.

"Oh, gentlemen, kind gentlemen!" she cried, "you will not let that terrible man harm my papa?"

"Waal, miss!" cried Injun Sid, swelling with indignation, "I should druther say not!"

Then turning to the Fool o' Fiddler's Folly, he demanded:

"Look a-hyar, you! what have you got ag'in' this hyar pilgrim as I never sot eyes on afore?"

The Fool o' Fiddler's Folly bowed his head, and shaking it sadly, replied:

"God forbid that I should seek to harm him! What am I?"

"Waal, as fur that," replied Sid, taking him

literally, "I'm blowed ef I kin mostly make out! I've seen queer josies afore I ever sot eyes on you; but I'll eat my head ef you don't hold jest a p'int ur two over the best of 'em!"

"What in Cain air ye starin' at the gal like that fur?" demanded Blue-ruin Bob, scowling at the Fool.

It is the delight of such a nature as his to torture anything helpless; and from the first he had manifested a grudge against this gentle, inoffensive man. Now, seeing that he had the countenance of better men, because of their sympathy with the beautiful girl, he, seconded by his crowd, moved toward the Fool, prepared to jostle him rudely.

But another interposed.

"Stand back! What has this man done?"

And Jack Sand stepped between Bob and his intended victim, elbowing the bully aside.

Blue-ruin Bob smiled, the smile of murderous hatred.

"Look a-hyar, boss," he said, "it ain't time fur you an' me to have our set-to yit. The account is big enough as it is. Suppose we don't git in each other's way any more than we kin help ontel we're ready fur the grand round-up?"

"Whenever you try to crowd a man that has done nothing to you or anybody else, you will find me *always* in your way!" said Jack, coolly.

Then he turned to the crowd.

There was marked dissatisfaction in their looks.

"Gentlemen," he said, "let us go at this thing quietly. What has this man done?" And he put his hand on the Fool's shoulder.

No one could lay anything to his charge except a vague dislike growing out of his difference from other men.

In the coach the shivering wretch was cowering in his daughter's lap. It was useless to ask an explanation of him.

"Maybe you can make this thing all right," said Jack, kindly, to the Fool. "Whatever it means, be assured that you shall have fair play."

"Thank you!"

Then, walking up to the coach, he said:

"George, it is only I. What have you ever had to fear from me?"

The man thus addressed did not reply. He only shrunk the closer.

"Lost! lost!" he kept repeating to himself.

"Who are you?" demanded his daughter.

"Your father's—"

He paused and looked at the girl with his sad eyes. Then in a voice of infinite gentleness, he went on:

"Your mother's friend!"

"My mamma is dead!" replied the girl, with a break in her voice.

"Dead?" repeated the Fool.

He put his hand up to his throat, and seemed to stagger under the shock of the announcement.

"Dead! dead!" he reiterated.

He did not take his eyes off the girl. Their light grew more tender. Then he went on:

"She has left me her child so like herself. You are in trouble. Let me succor you. Do you fear me? See! I have nothing but kindness for you."

He extended his hands toward her.

"My papa knows whether you are an enemy or not. Papa, who is he?—why do you fear him?"

"He will betray us! Oh, I am lost!" shivered the poor wretch.

"George," once more essayed the Fool, "I know nothing of the cause of your present trouble. Something tells me that you *are* in trouble. But when did I fail in loyalty to you? Have I not done much—for *her* sake? Come to me. You can trust me now as in the past."

George Lothrop raised his head and looked a piteous appeal at the man who sought to win his confidence.

"Come!" said the latter. "Let me help you to alight. I will take you to my home; and, such as it is, it shall be yours."

"He seems kindly disposed toward us, papa," said the girl.

The invalid yielded to the hand that lifted him, now clinging to the Fool, and whispering into his ear:

"You won't betray me, Ned? I have fled two thousand miles, only to run upon you! It's like a judgment! But you won't betray me! Remember, you cannot strike me without hurting *her* daughter. The child loves me. You see that she does."

It was the whine of a craven soul. The man groveled like a whipped cur, as he made his appeal.

"Fear nothing," said the Fool.

He almost lifted the shivering wretch bodily out of the coach.

Then he turned to assist the daughter to alight. Now his whole frame quivered, as she put her hand in his.

She looked searchingly into his face. It seemed as if she was tracing his features to find a resemblance to some recollection.

Suddenly she exclaimed:

"I am not afraid of you!"

"God forbid!" he aspirated.

He still held her hand, which she made no effort to release, while he thrust his other through her father's arm, to support him.

Jack Sand, yielding to a sudden impulse, took the other side, and so they led the invalid into the hotel.

There he was given food and rest, while the Fool procured a horse on which he bore him to his own hut in the gulch.

That night a party of three men rode into Cony Flat. They were shrewd, determined-looking men, with an air of authority about them.

"Landlord," said the spokesman of the party, "can you direct me to the head man of this camp? I don't suppose that you have any very formal organization; but I want the man whose authority is generally recognized—the head of your Vigilance Committee will do. I presume no camp, however small, can get along without a Vigilance Committee."

"Well," replied Powers, "fur the matther o' that, ye'll foind that Red Dump ain't behind her neighbors. I'm thinkin' it's Sid Colton ye're wantin'. He's as good a man as we've got."

"Where is he?"

"If he ain't somewhere 'bout handy, we can scare him up for ye. Dinny, are yez afther for seein' Injun Sid, I dunno?"

"Sure, he's gone to the Fool's."

"To the Fool's is it? An' phwat are ye shtandin' tha-ur fur, whin it's wantin' him this minute we are? Off wid yez, now, an' don't kape the gentleman waitin' all the day!"

Sid made his appearance looking curiously at the new-comers.

The moment he took them in, a faint change passed over his face. There was a just perceptible hardening of the eyes and setting of the lips.

"Well, gentlemen?" he asked, a little stiffly.

"I have been led to understand that you are the responsible man of this place," said the spokesman, blandly.

"Waal," drawled Sid, "we're purty much all alike hyar jest now. Our last alcalde went up higher a couple o' days ago. But ef you could wait, now, fur a day ur two, we'll be in trim to show ye an alcalde as is an alcalde."

"My business is rather too urgent, thanks," said the spokesman, with a smile. "I think that you will answer my purpose, if you will kindly give us a brief interview."

"Starts in too sweet!" was Sid's mental comment.

Aloud he said:

"Drive ahead, boss! My time is at your disposal."

Drinks were ordered; and then the spokesman, having drawn him a little apart from the curious crowd, laid his credentials before him.

"These papers will show you that I am the sheriff of St. Jo, Missouri. These gentlemen are detectives from New York city. We have trailed down to your camp one George Lothrop and his daughter, the said George Lothrop being under indictment on the charge of defaulting his trust as cashier of the Merchants' and Mechanics' Bank. We ask your co-operation in apprehending him."

Sid Colton rose to his feet, and straightened his spine in a manner that bordered on the offensive.

"Waal, gents," he said, "let me tell you in a friendly way that you have come to the wrong shop. You won't find nobody that you want *hyar*, ye onderstand!"

"But the man and his daughter left Silverado in the coach; and there stands the vehicle now. They can't have gone any further."

"That's all right, boss! But ef I onderstand ye to be a-givin' of me the lie—"

"I have not done so. I confess that I am a little surprised at the attitude you have chosen to assume—"

"Maybe you don't like it."

It was plain that Sid was fishing round for a quarrel.

Sheriff Morgan never allowed himself to be drawn away from the discharge of his duty if he could help it.

"Permit me to thank you for your courtesy so far," he began; when Sid interrupted him:

"Boys," he cried, appealing to the crowd, "this hyar gent says that he is after an abscondin' cashier what has come to this camp with his daughter. Have any of you seen any sich parties?"

"Nary a one, ole man!" was the prompt response from the man who happened to stand nearest.

It was plain that, without any prearrangement, Red Dump was tacitly combined to screen the father of the girl one glance of whose blue eyes had taken the camp captive.

Sheriff Morgan read the situation at a glance. He had had to contend with such cases before.

"Waal, how's that?" asked Sid, turning toward him.

Before he could reply the stage-driver lounged into the room.

"Hallo, Goss!" cried Sid, hastening to get in the first word. "You hain't brought no run-away cashiers o' no New York banks to this hyar camp, have ye?"

He looked hard at Goss; but the latter had already improved his time by getting outside of enough poor whisky to make his thoughts slow and uncertain.

"What's that thar, boss?" he asked, looking from Sid to the sheriff and detectives.

"Where are the sick man and his daughter whom you brought here this morning?" asked Sheriff Morgan.

Joe saw what was up, but was too full to have his usual ready wit about him. His friends relied on him, and "got left."

"Waal, pardner," he said, "I reckon they've gone on through."

Sheriff Morgan smiled.

"The deuce they have!" cried Sid Colton, in disgust.

And then, catching the sheriff's eye, the thin mask was so palpably torn off that he laughed.

"You're welcome to hunt 'em," he said.

"But I warn ye beforehand that you won't find no man in this hyar camp that has seen 'em—eh, boys?"

"Nary!"

"I suppose that there will be no interference with my search?" said the sheriff.

"What do you take us fur?" asked Sid, with righteous indignation. "Ain't we law-abidin' citizens?"

And he stuck his tongue into his cheek.

A word passed between the sheriff and his colleagues, and they separated to begin the search.

The moment their backs were turned Sid seized upon a shock-headed lad who stood with a grin stretching his mouth from ear to ear.

"Run to the Fool's shebang," he cried, "and tell him to snake his man into the woods. Now, mind yer eye! Slip off without bein' seen."

"It'll take better men than them to pick me up!" said the lad, priding himself on his ability to carry out the plans of the older man.

A few minutes later he was seen lounging out of the camp with a fishing-pole as crooked as a ram's horn over his shoulder, and a tin can, supposed to contain bait, dangling at the extreme end.

"He'll do!" exclaimed Sid, glancing after him with satisfaction.

Then he turned to the men.

"Boys," he said, "thar's goin' to be music in this hyar camp. That thar feller ain't half so mild as he looks. He's one o' the kind that don't let go easy—you hyar me?"

"What's to be done?" asked one of the men. "He ain't goin' fur to take that leetle gal's dad out o' this camp while thar's a man on two legs to stand in his way!"

"You jest bet he ain't!" concurred Sid, emphatically. "Ef it comes to fight, why, fight it is!"

"He's comin' a sly dodge. He's layin' fur men that will tell him whar his quarry is, an' that'll back him ef it comes to the tug."

"He won't find many in this camp."

"Thar's Bob's gang. Bob'll do anything to sarcumvent you."

"He's been approachin' one o' the squad—Andy Morrison," said another.

"Boys," said Colton, "pass the word on the quiet, an' have all of our men ready for quick motions."

This order was at once acted upon.

Meanwhile the lad, the moment he was out of sight, had dropped his fishing-rod and run at the top of his speed to the Fool's habitation.

When he got within earshot of the place he was startled by the sound of the most agonizing shrieks issuing from the hut.

"They've got him!" he cried to himself. "But, hang it all! how did they cut in ahead of me? I've come the shortest way, on the keen jump every step."

He dashed forward, determined to take part in the fray, if the officers of the law were being resisted. He had all of a boy's wild lawlessness and defiance of restraint.

As he drew near, it became evident that a fierce struggle was going on in the shanty. Through the wild cries of the man pierced the finer treble of the girl in expostulation.

Suddenly the door was burst open, and George Lothrop rushed out, looking like a madman. His clothes were torn. There was blood on his face and hands.

He was followed by the Fool o' Fiddler's Folly in determined pursuit. He, too, bore tokens of a fierce struggle.

The lad stopped open-mouthed.

"Gosh all fish-hooks!" he cried. "He's got him out hyar fur to murder him!"

CHAPTER XII.

A STRANGE PROPOSAL.

"STOP him! stop him! The man is delirious!" shouted the Fool.

Behind him appeared Grace Lothrop, crying: "Papa! Oh, papa!"

Kid Shannon was a knowing youth. His wits had been sharpened by knocking about from his cradle up. One comprehensive glance satisfied him that the man was indeed delirious, and the Fool's intentions those of a friend.

The scene thus understood acquired all the fascination of a man-hunt; and the lad entered into it with keen zest.

His training as a city gamin taught him what to do to make himself effective; and as the fugitive tore past him he thrust out his foot and tripped him.

George Lothrop went to the ground with a crash, and the boy leaned upon him to hold him down. But discovering that he was stunned by the fall, he rose in some anxiety.

"I didn't go fur to do it, boss," he said, as the Fool came up.

Without reply the latter lifted the head of the fallen man.

As he did so, the daughter rushed up, and at sight of her father's ghastly face, covered with blood and dirt, she threw herself down beside him with a wail of distress and fear.

"Hush! hush!" said the Fool, tenderly drawing her away from the body. "This is no sight for you. Let me lift him and carry him back into the house."

So, with the unconscious head resting on his shoulder, he bore him in. Whatever he had suffered through this man, it was plain that nothing of malice found lodgment in his heart.

While restorative efforts were being made, Kid forgot his errand; but when the eyes opened and the man lay weak yet perfectly rational, he hastened to say:

"Oh! I forgot, boss! Injun Sid sent me to tell you that you'd have to run this hyar gent out into the woods. They've—"

"That will do! I know what is good for my patient; and it shall be done. If you will come out and get some water, while I fetch wood—"

He led the way out of the shanty as he spoke, Kid following with mouth agape.

The boy had never before heard him speak otherwise than with a meekness that won the contempt of men like Blue-ruin Bob. His present quiet authoritative tone commanded respect.

"Now what is it? Speak quickly and to the point!" he said, with an abrupt change of manner; and the bright boy saw that he had prevented him from blurting out his news before the girl who already had as much anxiety as she could well bear.

He began to perceive that the fool was no ordinary man.

"They've come fur him," he said, tersely.

"They? Who?"

"The sheriff."

"The sheriff! On what charge? But stop! That is nothing to me. Injun Sid proposes to stand by him!"

"The boys is all solid, ef the cops don't talk over some o' Blue-ruin Bob's gang. Bob's dead ag'in' you an' Sid, ye understand."

"Go back and say that it is impossible to move the man. You can tell how you found him."

He hinted nothing as to what was to be done in the circumstances. He knew the boys well enough to know that they needed no prompting.

Kid made racing-time back, but entered the camp with a limp, as if he had received a severe fall, which would account for his early return, if he had been noticed.

"That boy's bound to make somethin'!" cried Injun Sid, delighted at the sign of intelligence. "Waal, what's the word, my lad?"

Shannon told the story.

"H'm!" growled Sid, his face hardening with determination. "Then the only thing is to defend him! Boys, we're all ready?"

"You bet!"

"Then—Hyar comes Ulster Johnny."

"What now?" asked Ulster—Jack in his new character.

The situation was explained to him.

"Of course!" was his emphatic assent. "Law goes by courtesy in this country. Right or wrong, they're not going to worry that girl any more just now."

"Cap," said Sid, "as you're goin' to be alcalde o' this hyar town, perhaps it would be jest as well ef you'd keep out of this 'thing. The boys kin head them legal gents off without your help, an' then you'll go into office with clean hands."

"On the contrary," said Jack, a thought of Grace Lothrop's face flitting through his mind, "if I am going to run things at all, I might as well begin now as any other time."

And he took the lead forthwith.

Half an hour later two-score men had slipped out of the camp "on the quiet," and were secreted about the hut of the Fool o' Fiddler's Folly.

Jack Sand entered the shanty, where a strange scene awaited him.

When the Fool re-entered his shanty, after sending back work to Injun Sid, his patient said to him:

"I want to see you alone."

And turning to his daughter:

"My dear, you can wait outside."

"But, papa—"

"I shall not keep you long."

She looked at him yearningly, and then obeyed without a word of further protest.

The Fool was struck by something in her manner. It was as if she made her father's will her own, easily and naturally, as with long habit, in spite of a strong reluctance to leave him.

The Fool took her hand and led her to the door, tenderly, almost reverently.

She looked up into his face confidently.

"I can trust him with you," she said. "But, oh! be careful not to let him excite himself again!"

The man gazed into her eyes, and was so shaken through all his nature that he could not reply.

As, returning he approached the bed on which the sick man lay, he wiped his dry lips with a tremulous hand.

He looked up, and discovered George Lothrop's eyes fixed upon him in a piercing scrutiny.

"You love her, as you did her mother!" declared the latter.

The Fool started back, as if he had received a sword-thrust.

He stood gasping and staring at the other with wondering reproach in his woe-begone eyes, as if asking mutely the reason of this wanton stab. Then he bowed his head, with a resignation which patiently awaited whatever was to come.

A bitter smile flitted across George Lothrop's face.

"You think that, even standing as I do face to face with death, I have not learned consideration for the rights or feelings of others?" he asked.

"I did not say that it was cruel to taunt me with—with—that!" replied the Fool.

"But think it all the same."

"You might have spared me!"

"Sit down," said the sick man—"here by the bedside, where I can talk to you without effort."

The Fool advanced slowly and sat down as he was bid.

George Lothrop let his eye run over his face and figure.

He was ghastly pale, with a clammy ooze on his skin, and he trembled in every nerve.

"This is my work," Lothrop went on to say. "You were a fine-looking man once, full of life and with the light of hope in your eyes. Now you are but a wreck of your early self."

The Fool made no reply, but sat with his eyes on the floor before him, and his thoughts far back in the bitter-sweet past!

"Ned," again began Lothrop, "I don't believe that I feel any proper remorse, as no doubt most people would say that I ought to. When I robbed you of Grace Bayard, by fraud—You see that I don't coddle myself with tender names. I lied to her! I did worse than that. I drugged her, so that she had no clear consciousness of what she was doing when she mumbled whatever responses I put into her mouth; and I did not let her come out of that state until she had been two weeks my wife."

"Stop! Why are you telling me this?" cried the Fool, leaping to his feet in an agony. "She is at rest!—your daughter told me so. What good will it do you—even you—to tear the bandages off of this hideous sore of damnable wrong?"

"Sit down!" commanded the sick man, unmoved by this outburst. "I am not doing it simply for my amusement, as you perhaps suppose. For the rest, you will soon have your revenge. I am marked for death. I know it."

His lips whitened at the thought, but he controlled himself.

"But let me go on. When she came to herself, and learned that the die of her life was cast beyond recall, her despair was something to make most men's blood run cold. At first she was seized with a fit of terror, as frantic as if she had waked to find herself in the cell of a madman—or let us say, with a snake! Her one thought was to run away. I locked the door, and stood with my back to the window, to prevent her from throwing herself through it. It was three stories from the ground. Suddenly she seemed to collapse. I think it was the thought that no distance or flight could wipe out those two weeks. Anyhow, she sat down with her hands clasped in her lap, and her eyes riveted on the floor before her."

"I thought for a while that she would go insane, but she did not. I let her have it out without disturbance. She sat there without a single motion for four or five hours by the watch. I never was so bored in my life. I confess that I nearly fell asleep waiting for her. It was an infinite relief when she at last came out of her abstraction with a long-drawn sigh."

"In the quietest, most submissive voice you ever heard she asked me: 'What do you wish me to do?'—and from that time on she never made a sign of resistance to anything I proposed. But that she was a little dull, she was a model wife, I assure you."

"When her child was born, I fully expected it to be an idiot. What was my agreeable disappointment when, as the child grew, I saw that the only effect of the mother's somewhat unusual experience was that it inherited her docility. I have but to speak, and my will seems to become hers. If I were to express the wish that she become your wife, she would do it."

At that suggestion the Fool started, and was so shaken that it were foolish to strive to hide his emotion.

"Understand me," pursued Lothrop, "she would not yield obedience at a sacrifice of feeling. Her inclination would go along with the

act; and I have not the least doubt that she would make you as excellent a wife as if she had been courted in the ordinary way."

"Stop!" cried the Fool, huskily. "Is there no refinement of cruelty too ruthless for even—"

"My indulgence? Wait until you have heard me out. As I have said, I believe that I have no proper remorse. But as time wore on, that silent, too-tractable woman became a regular Mordecai at my gate. At first she irritated me, but in the end she fairly haunted me. For my own relief, I undertook to divert her with social dissipation; and to pay the fiddler I was forced into speculation—of course, with the usual result. I got over my head, borrowed from the too-tempting till of the bank, falsified my accounts, and after years of hell on earth, was one morning asked by the directors whether we were in condition to weather the panic.

"Leaving that problem to be solved by an expert accountant, I came West.

"Meanwhile the mother had pined away; but I have the daughter with me, so like, yet—different—so improved, that you must admit that in giving her to you I shall make more than fair restitution.

"As far as you are concerned, it is my whim to make this reparation. On the other hand, as a parent, I know that I shall be leaving my child in safe hands. You see, I am not wanting in appreciation of your worth.

"Come now! With whom rather than with you would her mother have left her?"

The Fool had bowed his head on his clasped hands. His tense muscles, his quivering frame, showed how masterful an emotion swayed him. He was whirled away in a simoom of delirious ecstasy.

He told himself that this was a boon sent by Providence, that so long had tried him; it was a bequest of that sorrowing mother. Who indeed would so pour the wine of his long-pent love into the chalice of this beautiful creature?

Ah! how now he gloried in that wealth which he had gathered with so careless a hand! What had prompted him to do so, when he had regarded it all as so much yellow dross which could not buy him an hour of happiness? Little did these men who had scorned him dream that he could buy and sell the best of them, if it came to weighing gold.

Ay! all that the world could supply he would pour into her lap!

"Give her to me!" he cried, seizing hold of the father with both hands, and gazing at him with blazing eyes, "give her to me, and—and—Oh, my God!"

As by a flash of lightning was revealed to him what they were proposing between them.

He flung away the hands he had caught as if they held life and joy, crying:

"Are you the devil? After the damnable wrong you have done the mother, you are tempting me to perpetrate the like on the daughter! It is not enough that you have broken the heart and blasted the life of one. You must work the destruction of the other, and sink my soul into a hell of remorse forevermore, through this mad passion which has gained possession of me! Away with you! Oh! I could strangle you where you lie!"

But he dropped upon his knees, and buried his face in his bed-blanket, while his frame was torn by stormy sobs.

"Take it coolly," warned George Lothrop. "You were always too excitable. Besides, you are too idealistic for this practical age. Women are not made of such sentimental stuff as you imagine. I grant you that when they are in love with one man they don't take very kindly to another. But the girl has been in a convent school ever since her mother's death, and doesn't know one man from another. Suppose she marries you of her own free will? I promise not to use any unfair means. You yourself shall hear all that I say to her. She is prepossessed with you already.

"Her mother took a strange freak. Just before her death she gave her daughter a miniature of you, and told her that if she ever ran across you in life, she must love you with her whole heart. Without knowing the story connected with it, she has woven a romance about the picture, and is really in love with it. You saw that she half-recognized you through all this hair, and was at once inspired with confidence. Suppose you shave it off, and appear to her in your true character?

"She knows nothing of the reason of my flight; and you must have lost some of your cleverness if you cannot keep her ignorant of it, even if the detectives ferret us out. I will say that, feeling death upon me, I have brought her to the man to whom her mother commended her.

"Come! come! You would be a fool to throw away this chance of happiness."

The Fool lifted a ghastly face and bloodshot eyes.

"If she really comes to me, I will not put her away!"

"Well, that isn't an acceptance that most girls would consider particularly flattering; but perhaps under the circumstances you are somewhat excusable. But you will have to look

different from that, or she will be afraid of you."

The Fool rose with a mad fever rushing along his veins.

He turned, and stood face to face with Jack Sand!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HEATHEN CHINEE.

FROM his last "stand-off" by Jack Sand, Bob went away boiling with rage.

"Look a-hyar," he said to his satellite, Sly Sam; "you've got to cook up some way o' puttin' that rooster out o' the way without bringin' the boys down on us. They won't stan' knifin' n'r pluggin' in the back—"

"You jest bet they won't!" agreed Sam.

"What's to be done, then? He's got to go—that's flat!"

And he added an oath by way of emphasis.

"Thar's more ways than one to skin a cat!" said Sam, sentimentally.

"But this 'un'll do some tall scratchin'—remember that."

"Suppose," said Sam, with his eyes half-closed, "we could throw that leetle affair between hyar an' Cony Flat off on him?"

"What's that?" demanded Bob, sharply.

"He was drummed out o' camp not more'n an hour ahead o' that grip-sack—everybody knows that," pursued Sam, as if he were thinking aloud.

Blue-ruin Bob interrupted him with a round oath.

"You're a knowin' one! We kin sw'ar it on him!"

"As easy as rollin' off a log. It's the gittin' somebody to believe us that's the pinch. They might ask us how we happened to know so much about it."

A savage oath showed that Bob was already at a stand-still.

"I've been thinkin' it over," went on Sam, composedly, "an'—Have you got any washin' you want done?"

"Washin'? What's that got to do with it?"

"Waal, ye see, I seen Ching Ling come away from the Hardscrabble with a bigger bundle than any one but Jack Sand would be likely to give him. Now, suppose that thar was his wash?"

"Waal, what difference would it make to us of it was? We don't want none o' his dirty clo's, do we?"

"I ain't so sure o' that!"

Bob waited open-mouthed. He had great faith in his subordinate's ingenuity. However remote Sam seemed to start from the point, he always brought up at the right place in the end.

He now established a connection between Jack Sand's washing and the success of their plot and posted Bob in the part he was to play.

But it was necessary to find Ching Ling at home and alone; while it happened that on this particular day he had a guest—one Wang Ti—of an exceedingly social turn. So while Celestial, if not heavenly, music—"chin-music"—passed in rather hobgobbly antiphonal over the suds, Blue-ruin Bob was fain to hurl very uncelestial English after the precious moments as they flew by.

During this enforced waiting Sheriff Morgan came upon the scene; and it soon became known that men were worth something to him.

"Stand him off till we know whether we are to have this rod in pickle fur Jack Sand," said Sly Sam, who was ever at Blue-ruin Bob's elbow when wanted. "We may dicker with him fur his support in puttin' our man in a hole."

"But what authority has he hyar?" asked Bob.

"None whatever," admitted Sam, frankly. "But he's a man with a head on his shoulders; an' every man o' that kind counts."

"Then we'll have to post our boys."

"The sooner the better."

Thus it happened that George Lothrop was so long left undisturbed. When the sheriff got hold of Injun Sid's men, they were profoundly ignorant of any such persons as he described. When he ran across any of the other crowd, the men acted mysterious, as who could make revelations if they would; but they referred him to their chief. Bob "stood him off," but intimated that they might come to terms later in the day.

Finally, Wang Ti having gone home, "wagging his tail behind him," Bob betook himself to the humble domicile of the smocked and junk-shod Ching Ling.

"Hello hyar, you John!" he cried, roughly. "D'ye see this hyar shirt? I want you to put yer fine touches on it."

"Washee belly clean!" was Ching Ling's assurance.

"Ef you don't, I'll ram it down yer heathen throat!"

"No China boy washee allee same like Ching Ling. Clean shirtee—clean shave!"

And he grinned from ear to ear, to win the bully to good-humor.

His reference was to the sign which appeared over his door. Some good-natured miner had rudely traced for him the legend:

"A CLEAN SHIRT AND A CLEAN SHAVE."

Blue-ruin Bob leaned back against the wall with the air of a tired man, and drew a black bottle from his pocket. He seemed to be surprised and vexed to find that there was but a swallow or two of liquor in it. He drank that off, and then proceeded to objugate the bottle, the liquor that had been in it and the liquor that it lacked, the manufacturer of the bottle and the distiller and vender of the liquor. Beginning anew, he anathematized himself, his heart and soul, his throat, his tongue, his craving for liquor, the camp—where, he asseverated, a man could not get a drink fit for a Christian—the day and all other days in which a man's thirst was likely to be excited.

But, noticing that Ching Ling was staring at him while he shook in his shoes and showed his timidity by conciliatory smirks and shrugs and divers and sundry contortions of the body, he suddenly broke off and began to swear at the poor fellow for looking at him. He followed this up with a demand that he supply him with something to drink; and when Ling assured him, with all sorts of heathen pledges of his truth, that he was a good John and never indulged in liquor, and therefore had none in the house, he cursed him for his temperance, and then for his religion, and finally for his unchristian make-up in general; and ended by giving him money to get the bottle filled.

Overjoyed that he was not required to pay for it out of his own means, Ching Ling hurried away, fearing the consequences of delay.

Blue-ruin Bob kicked the door shut close behind the fluttering skirts of the Celestial, so that to an observant outsider it would look as if he had drawn it to after him, and at once pounced upon a bundle of soiled linen which he had already "located."

Securing a pair of cuffs, he tore off a button from the wristband of one of the shirts, to give the appearance of violence.

A few minutes later he heard the firm tread of one who walked in heeled boots, accompanied by the muffled scuff of junk shoes; and the door opened to give admittance to the Fool of Fiddler's Folly, with Ching Ling at his heels.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DIE IS CAST.

THE Fool turned from his strange arrangement to face Jack Sand.

The latter was pale with the emotions awakened by what he had overheard.

He had been fascinated by Grace Lothrop's beauty. But what was the interest that had resulted?

It might be only a chivalric desire to shield her from the selfish love of a man who sought to immolate her happiness on the altar of his blind passion.

"But perhaps I am a little too previous," said Jack to himself. "It might be well to wait for some expression of disinclination on the part of the lady herself."

The Fool was too much absorbed in his own emotions to be surprised at the appearance of Jack.

"You have come to defend her?" he asked, taking Jack's hand.

"To the death, if necessary!" said Jack, with feeling.

"There are others with you?"

"Enough to stand off any force the officers can gather."

"They know that he is here, of course?"

"By this time. They have got hold of some of Blue-ruin Bob's gang."

"I must leave him—and her—in your charge for a short time, while I go to the camp. I have confidence in you personally. May I rely upon you to keep all knowledge of the real state of things from the lady? She is wholly ignorant of her father's position—I mean in relation to the law. I will say to you that—that the happiness—that I am deeply interested—"

He held Jack's hand with an appealing clasp, and looked into his eyes with a gaze that completed his broken sentence.

"Have no uneasiness," said Jack, returning a fervent pressure.

"I shall owe more to all of you than I can ever express," said the Fool.

Jack felt him start violently before dropping his hand, as Grace made her appearance at the door.

"May I come in now?" she asked, anxiously.

"Certainly," replied the Fool, in a greatly agitated voice.

At sight of her his heart swelled so that it seemed as if he could not articulate another syllable to save his life.

"He is not worse?" she whispered, as she passed him.

The Fool made no reply, but gazed after her as she hastened to her parent's side, with something akin to terror in his eyes.

"What if he speaks to her now?" went like a flash through his brain.

All in a panic he hurried after her.

"You will pardon me if I interrupt you for a last word with your father?"

She drew back, wonderingly.

"Not a word until I return!" he whispered. "I have your promise? I must hear everything that is said to her!"

"I prefer that you should," replied Lothrop. "You will see then how readily she accedes."

He turned away, apparently satisfied; but as he passed Jack, he caught his hand in passionate appeal.

"There is so much depending upon it!" he said to himself, by way of apology for mistrusting the man who had already wronged him so deeply. "He shall not secure her consent unfairly if I can help it."

To Jack he whispered, with a look and tone which showed that some great stake was at issue:

"Let nothing take you out of the room until I return!"

Without knowing what it all meant, Jack returned assurance of fidelity in a pressure of the hand.

Then with his brain in a whirl the Fool went out.

Reaching the camp, he sought a shanty about which a lot of clothes were hung on bushes to dry in the sun, while others were yet soaking in tubs.

He was overtaken by the son of the Flowery Kingdom, and found within—Blue-ruin Bob!

Having accomplished his purpose, Bob was really in good humor; but it would not do for one of his bullying disposition to allow it to appear.

"Waal, you got yer own way—didn't ye?" he asked, insolently.

"I did," replied the Fool, with quiet dignity.

Bob felt the change, but was not subtle enough to discern wherein it consisted.

"Much good may it do you!" he growled, angered without knowing just why.

"I expect much good to spring from it."

"Look a-hyar! I don't want no back-talk out o' you!"

The Fool made no reply; and Bob passed out, vaguely dissatisfied with himself.

What was Ching Ling's astonishment when the Fool quietly signified his wish to be shaven and shorn.

"All off?" he cried, throwing up his hands and elevating his brows.

"All but a mustache."

The Celestial went to work as if he felt that he was performing a sacrilege.

When his office was done, the Fool stood up a new man. His most intimate friends would fail to recognize him. He looked as if twenty-five years had somehow fallen away from him. The profound melancholy which had distinguished him was now intershot with the beams of a strange new hope, like the rising aurora.

When he left Ching Ling's, the astonished Celestial followed him, and saw him procure a new suit of clothes, which still further altered his appearance.

He was stared at by every one he met. There was something familiar in his looks; yet they could not place him.

Returning to his shanty, he was challenged by the guard which surrounded it.

"Hold on, stranger! You can't go no further in this direction without tellin' what's your business."

"Don't you know me, Sid?" he asked, with a smile of keen pleasure.

Injun Sid's jaw dropped.

"The Fool, I'll be blowed!"

"That might be put in a little more complimentary shape; but I freely forgive you."

"By Jove! I beg yer pardon! But who'd 'a' thunk it? Why, you ain't yerself nohow!"

"I hope not—my old self."

"But what's the meaning of all this? What has sich a man as you been goin' about lookin' like a scare-crow fur, all this time? An' what's up now?"

"We shall see."

He passed on, and entered the shanty.

Jack Sand stared at him, plainly not recognizing him.

"Good-afternoon, sir!" he said, aggressively.

"Good-afternoon," replied the Fool.

"Well, sir! what can we do for you?" demanded Jack.

But without replying, the Fool looked beyond him, at a spectacle that sent the blood coursing through his veins madly, and set every nerve atingle.

Jack heard a quick, gasping sigh, and turned also.

Grace Lothrop stood before her father's bed with her hands pressed to her breast and her eyes fixed upon the Fool in a strange rapt gaze. It was impossible to tell whether it expressed surprise, wonder, or delight. A lover might have been excused for thinking that he saw all three there.

Behind her George Lothrop appeared resting on his elbow, and looking at the Fool with a smile which seemed to say:

"What did I tell you?"

A dizziness seized upon the man to whom heaven seemed opening. He groped with one hand behind him for something to grasp for support.

Upon seeing his profile, Jack recognized him, and divined what had happened.

"She's in love with him already," he said to himself.

A generous impulse, a glow of sympathy with this man's late-coming happiness, thrilled him, and he took the groping hand to sustain him.

"It's all right!" he said in his ear. "A blind man could see it."

He felt the hand close down hard upon his.

"Has he said anything to her that you have not heard?" asked the Fool, in a whisper through which thrilled an agony of suspense.

"Not a word!" was Jack's assurance.

"Have I been the subject of their conversation?"

"No."

A profound sigh of relief escaped the tremulous lips of the man to whom this might mean so much.

But the girl had spoken in a low, hurried voice which scarcely reached them.

"Who is it, papa?"

"You ought to know, my dear."

"Mr. Gordon?"

"Of course. Your mother used to call him Ned."

With strangely blended shyness and boldness, the girl advanced, extending her hand and saying:

"You are surprised at my resemblance to my mother, whom you used to know—are you not? I feel that I know you very well. I have—"

But here she broke off with a vivid blush.

She had nearly told him that she had been dreaming of this meeting for years.

He already held her hand.

"If you do not remind me of the difference," he said, with melting tenderness in his voice, "I shall pick up the thread of my life again where it was broken when last I held your mother's hand in mine!"

But at the sound of his voice the girl had started; ejaculating:

"Why—"

She scanned his face narrowly and exclaimed:

"Can it be— It is— That accounts for my trusting you!"

There was a momentary quailing of the heart, when he saw that she had recognized him as the man who had gone out of her presence an hour ago looking so strangely different from other men. But the wondering look in her eyes was as open as it had been when she saw only the original of the photograph which she had received from her mother as a sacred legacy.

He breathed again!

"Grace!"

The voice which came from the bed was so changed that both started.

George Lothrop lay on his back, gasping for breath.

With a cry of alarm, his daughter sprung to his side.

"Stop!" he said. "There is no time for useless grief. I have something to accomplish before I die."

"Oh, papa! do not talk so terribly!"

"Listen to me. Give me your hand, Ned."

The Fool complied, with dark spots floating before his eyes and strange sounds ringing in his ears, now that the critical moment had come.

The dying man put their hands one within the other.

"My child," he said, your mother loved this man when he was a mere youth. I will not tell you what caused their separation. If she had wished you to know, she would have told you. But it broke her heart! You have seen the effect on him. He has been a hermit for her sake. But you remember her charge—if you ever came across him, you were to love him with all your heart. Fate has brought you together, and has decreed that I shall be taken from you at the very moment of your meeting. What then is more fitting than that I should leave you in his charge? There is but one way in which I can do it, and feel that your future is secured. As his wife you will be safe."

"His wife!" gasped the girl.

But though she shrunk back at the suggestion so suddenly sprung upon her, the clasp of her father's hand still held hers to that of the Fool.

The effect on him was profound. As she flashed her eyes round upon him, she saw that he had averted his face and covered it with his hand. Now, overcome with emotion, he sunk upon his knees and dropped his face upon the bed.

Her father kept on:

"Not now, but when I am gone, he will tell you how at sight of you the love he has brooded over all these years passed to you. You see the strength of it in this exhibition of its powers over him. My child, it is my wish; it would have been your mother's wish; it is his wish."

"He wishes it!"

"With my whole heart and soul! With all the longing of twenty years crowded into this moment! It is as if I had been waiting for you all this time; and now you were come! Oh, I have no words to tell you the half of what I feel for you! I love you! I love you!"

He had lifted his face to her, transfigured

with the intensity of his feelings. He now threw his arms about her, as he was on his knees.

The girl gazed into his face, and as if she were fascinated by the intensity of his regard, slowly yielded to the pressure of his arms, the frightened look gradually giving place to content, if not tenderness, until he had drawn her down where her lips touched his.

After a moment so, in which culminated all the ecstasy of his wildest dream of happiness, he dropped his face upon her bosom, and so clinging to her, fell to sobbing.

The girl was not frightened at this total abandonment of feeling. She seemed to understand it. Silently she stroked his hair.

But, upon looking up, a startled cry escaped her. Her father had lapsed into a swoon.

Upon being restored, he expressed a wish that the marriage be consummated at once.

Though her solicitude for him was such as was natural to one in her position, the girl offered no objection.

Jack Sand, who had witnessed the scene just described with emotions of which the principal actors were totally oblivious, stepped forward.

"I will go for the chaplain of the military post, if you wish it," he said.

The Fool clasped his hand.

"You will place me under an obligation which I cannot hope ever to be able to cancel," he said.

"This may strike you as a mad proceeding, but a man who has suffered what I have suffered cannot afford to be rational, when reason means debating the propriety of slipping into Heaven while the gate—which never opens but once in a lifetime—is ajar!"

Jack pressed his hand warmly.

"I sympathize with you," he said, in as steady a voice as he could command.

Then he left the shanty, went to the camp, mounted his horse and rode to the post, at the meteor gait to which only his stanch little mare was equal.

He had gone not more than half the distance when he came upon a lady on horseback.

That she was alone would have been cause for no particular surprise; but Jack was at once struck by her extreme pallor and unmistakable signs of excitement.

CHAPTER XV.

STOCKING THE CARDS.

FROM the shanty of the Celestial laundryman Blue-ruin Bob went to join his confederate.

"Hyar's yer cuffs. Now what's to be done with 'em?"

"One goes to Major Balfour."

"That's my work."

"The other goes into Jack Sand's saddle-bags."

"Into his saddle-bags? If they don't happen to be locked, sonny!"

Sam cocked his eye.

"Don't you trouble yourself about that. I haven't served my 'prenticeship fur nothin'."

"But you'll have to git into his room before you git into his saddle-bags."

"That's all right."

"What's the use o' runnin' the resk, Sam? Ef you hain't got no use fur the cuff, throw it away."

"Exactly!—ef we hadn't. But that's jest what we have got. Cuffs goes in pairs; an' ef you find one of 'em on a murdered man an' the other in Jack Sand's plunder—"

"That gent must have been on hand when they got separated, eh?"

"Blowed if you ain't gittin' sharp to see that! Maybe, now, it has occurred to you that when a man tears off another's cuff, it usually has a sleeve-button in it."

"That's so. But I reckon Jack Sand has got his on him; an' it'll put even you to it to steal 'em off his body while he's awake."

Sly Sam drew a pair out of his pocket.

"I allow these hyar will answer," he said.

"But them ain't Jack's," objected Bob.

"How kin he prove it, ef one is found with the major, an' the other in his plunder-kit?"

Bob's jaw dropped, as it always did when some idea of Sam's "held 'way over him."

"An' now," pursued Sam, "suppose you hand over the loot we was talkin' about; an' I'll be a-saltin' of his claim fur him."

Bob passed over the money, and the two worthies parted.

Going to the Hardscrabble, Sly Sam "took his bitters" and declared that he was dog sleepy.

"Ef you've got a bunk fur me," he said, "I believe I'll turn in fur a snooze."

"You'll have to hunt your own quarters," said the careless landlord.

"I'm usen to that, in this hyar worst-run shebang in the mines," replied Sam, with the rough frankness which among rude men passes for wit.

And without more ado he lounged off in the direction of the sleeping apartments.

While waiting for his drink he had with apparent aimlessness run his eye over the dog-eared register of the house, and discovered where Jack was "located."

The Hardscrabble Hotel was a mere shell of a house, with no ceiling between the floor and the rafters, divided into compartments just large

enough for a single bunk, by partitions which ran up but little higher than a man's head. These ran along either side of the house, with a narrow passage between.

From where he stood at his bar, the landlord could see down this passage; but among the numerous doors no one could be especially individualized.

Calculating on this fact, Sly Sam slouched boldly down the passage, and threw open the door next to Jack's.

His real purpose was to make sure that it was empty; but upon making the discovery, he slammed the door to again, as if he had found "a pair o' boots at one end o' the bunk an' a brace o' bull-dogs at the other, with the proprietor between 'em!"

He then as boldly threw open Jack's door, and walked in.

To secrete the money and the tell-tale cuff were for one of his experience the work of a moment.

Then he drew off his coat and boots, and reaching over the partition, dropped them into the bunk of the adjoining apartment.

A moment later he made his appearance again in the passage, in his stocking-feet and with his suspenders slapping his heels.

"Look a-hyar, Dan," he said to the host of the Hardscrabble, "you water yer whisky so that I allow it'll take another night-cap to lay me out."

"It's the p'izen that you galoots have been used to all your lives that makes you fire-proof to liquor that was distilled fur gentlemen," retorted Powers, good-humoredly. "I'll be hang-ed of I ain't about tired o' throwin' away a good article on sich-copper-lined—"

"Cheese it, Dan! You're like an alarm-clock. It's easy enough to set you a-goin', but deuced hard to stop ye after you're wound up fur all day."

Flinging the liquor down his throat at a gulp, Sly Sam lounged off down the passage, yawning and stretching himself as he went, and entered the room into which had dropped his coat and boots.

Five minutes later he might have been heard—indeed he must have been heard by any one not as deaf as a post—snoring "like a good fellow."

The fact was, he was never more wide awake in his life. To use his own expression, he had "taken a contract to play off sleep for two hours; and he was making a business of it."

Meanwhile, Blue-ruin Bob had gone to the scene of his murderous assault, making his way not by the road, but through the crags.

"It's queer that nobody has stumbled on to that ambulance yet," he said to himself.

And stealing from covert to covert, and listening with a guilty man's tremors, he crept to where he could get a view of the wreck.

Everything was just as he had left it. The road between the two camps was not a stage-route, and no solitary "pilgrim" had happened to pass that way.

He then went to where he had shot Major Balfour.

The unhappy officer lay on his back, blue and rigid in death.

At sight of him the murderer's hatred of his victim flared up in the heart of Blue-ruin Bob.

"Curse the white-livered sneak!" he growled.

"Served him right! What fur did he let his men git paralyzed? He'd ought to be shot fur that!"

He spurned the body with his foot, and added a general anathema against all men of respectability.

"But this hyar ain't business," he went on.

And stooping down, he fixed the cuff in the stiff fingers of the dead.

While he was in the act he was startled by a stamp close at hand, so that he leaped to his feet with a savage oath of fear and rage.

Framed in an opening among the crags stood a horse with its head thrown up, its nostrils dilated, its eyes blazing; and just before the animal, holding the bridle-rein, was a woman, half-shrinking back, yet fascinated with horror.

The unlucky intruder was remarkable for beauty of both face and figure, and had the air which comes of mingling in cultivated society. She was dressed in an elegant riding habit, and diamonds flashed from her ears.

With a bound he gained her side, seizing her by the wrist, and menacing her with his drawn bowie.

"What air ye doin' hyar?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"What were you doing there?" she returned.

"What I'll soon be doin' over ag'in hyar!"

"No you'll not, Bob."

"Bob!" repeated the murderer.

Then he chuckled a low laugh.

"Seein' it's you, maybe I won't," he said.

"But I'd be only sendin' the devil his own if I did."

"That as it maybe, you'll not harm me."

"An' you'll not blow on me, eh? Is it a go?"

The lady shook off his grasp with disdain.

"I wouldn't dirty my mouth with your name under any consideration!" she said.

Blue-ruin Bob laughed.

"Moll," he said, with insulting familiarity, "how long is it since you was only too glad to dirty your mouth with my kisses?"

The lady was so infuriated that she seemed unable to reply to him.

He laughed again.

"You're puttin' on fine airs lately with your officers. Maybe you've flirted with this one. But look out, my beauty! I may take it into my head to fetch you down a peg one o' these fine mornin's!"

"I think that we can cry quits now!" was the reply. "I hold your neck where you hold my reputation, and you needn't think that there is any love lost between us."

"I like yer nerve, my girl. Maybe one o' these days, when you've run the lay you're on now to hard-pan, an' the thing peters out, as sich things air bound to do, you won't scorn to make up the old quarrel."

"I'd see you hang first!"

"So you say now; but you wasn't so up-an'-upish when I used to knock you down an' roll you over with my foot! Thar's as fine as you tnat has come back to that."

Before she could reply he suddenly changed the conversation.

"What air ye doin' in this hyar part o' the country?"

"I am stopping at the military post."

"What air ye doin' thar?"

"I am the guest of Colonel Rawlinson's sister."

"The deuce ye say! An' how did you get in with them upper-tens?"

"That's none of your business."

"Maybe I'll turn it to account so as to put some money into my pocket. Look a-hyar, my beauty! this strikin' the paymaster ain't so bad, an' you kin put me up to it when thar's money goin' to ur from the post."

"Are you going to keep me standing here until some one comes and discovers us?"

Blue-ruin Bob uttered an oath.

"Go yer own way," he said; "but ef you blow what you have seen, I'll slit yer pretty throat from ear to ear!"

"I have lost my way," she said. "How can I get back to the post?"

He gave her the necessary directions, and she set out, to encounter Jack Sand, as we have seen.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WEB OF CIRCUMSTANCE.

THE equestrienne cast one scrutinizing glance at Jack, as he rode up to her, lifting his hat gallantly. What she saw seemed to inspire her with confidence.

"Oh, sir!" she exclaimed, "I think I have lost my way. If you could direct me to the military post—"

"With pleasure. I am on my way thither. If you will accept my escort—"

"You are very kind. Let us not lose a moment, if you please! Something terrible has happened. I must get word to Col. Rawlinson without delay."

Struck by her beauty as much as by her distress, Jack rode beside her, at a loss whether or not to engage her in conversation.

She was dressed in a black riding habit, the perfect fit of which and some little touches of adornment suggested a woman who knew what was becoming to her.

"Maiden, wife, or widow?" mused Jack.

But he had scarcely a moment for these speculations, when round a bend in the road appeared a party of horsemen.

At sight of them the lady uttered a suppressed cry, and spurred her horse forward.

The horsemen were a squad of soldiers, with an officer in uniform at their head.

"Mrs. Clymer!" exclaimed the commander, urging his horse to her side, and taking her hand. "What is the matter? Why do you look so alarmed?"

As he spoke he cast a glance of mistrust or dislike at Jack.

"Oh, Colonel Rawlinson!" cried the lady.

And clinging to him, she fell to sobbing hysterically.

Colonel Rawlinson was not a man to whom words of soothing came easily. If anything was wrong, his first thought was to set it right by calling somebody to summary account.

"If this fellow has dared to offer you an insult," he began, when the lady hastened to interrupt him.

"Oh! you are entirely mistaken. I have but just met him; and he has been nothing but kind. But I have the most terrible thing to tell you. The ambulance—"

"The ambulance! Have you seen it? And Major Balfour?"

"Oh! I do not know! Something awful has happened. I was out riding—"

"Without an escort, when you knew that I was at your service!"

There was something in this interruption which grated on Jack Sand's nerves. Only a supremely-selfish man would have intruded this personal matter at such a time.

The fact was that at sight of Jack, Colonel Rawlinson had conceived the idea that the lady's solitary ride might be for the purpose of meet-

ing him. He at once experienced a bitter hatred for him, which would yield to no proof that they had been until a moment before perfect strangers.

The lady kept on:

"—when I came upon the ambulance a complete wreck, with two or three poor fellows lying dead in the road. Oh, it was dreadful!"

"But Major Balfour?"

"He was nowhere about."

The lady shuddered as she spoke.

But Colonel Rawlinson had turned away from her. His eyes were fixed on Jack Sand.

"Well, sir!" he said, with a sharp, peremptoriness of an arrogant dictator, "what do you know about this?"

"I?" replied Jack, flushing and frowning with resentment. "What should I know?"

"You should know nothing," said the colonel, "seeing that it is probably a case of brigandage. But why did you start and change color so perceptibly when the lady announced the wrecking of the ambulance and the death of my soldiers?"

It was true that Jack had started. Somehow or other, his mind had at once gone back to the appearance of the Fool, whose absence from his shanty at such a time of night might be all right or all wrong.

Why he associated him with the crime, he would have been at a loss to say. Perhaps it was an involuntary catching at any excuse which would separate him from Grace.

But no sooner had the unhappy thought worked its mischief than a more generous impulse swept it from the field.

Whatever happened, he would not betray his rival. He resolved to take him apart before the ceremony which was to unite Grace's fortunes to his, and probe the matter to the bottom. If he proved innocent he would beg his pardon, urging in excuse the protection which any man owed to a girl whose natural protector lay helpless. If guilty, he would give him a chance for flight.

All this passed through his mind in an instant, while Colonel Rawlinson was speaking. Before he was done Jack was perfectly self-possessed.

"It is evident that you do not perceive the implication of your words," he said, looking the officer coolly in the face.

"On the contrary," replied the colonel, "I am so well satisfied with my impression, that I shall require you to accompany me until something definite is ascertained in this matter."

"Isn't this rather irregular, even for an army officer?" asked Jack, still self-possessed.

"If I prove in error, I shall know how to offer you the satisfaction of a gentleman. In view of that, I presume you will be willing to waive strict forms."

"Perfectly," said Jack, "since it is so evident that you are seeking a personal quarrel. Why, I cannot conceive; but doubtless you have your reasons."

"Gentlemen! Oh, colonel!" expostulated the lady.

Rawlinson interrupted her with a bow in which peremptoriness was thinly masked under the forms of politeness.

"He shall be treated with the consideration due a gentleman—unless he attempts to escape!" he said, with a significant emphasis on the concluding clause.

The lady bridled with displeasure.

"I do not presume to question your authority, Colonel Rawlinson," she said; "but I am free to confess that its exercise seems to me peculiarly ill-timed. If you do not consider me your prisoner—"

"I wish I might!" he hastily interrupted her—"for life!"

And he bowed low, with a look of undisguised admiration.

The lady turned away without finishing what she had set out to say.

"I hope, sir," she said to Jack, "that you will believe that I am not in sympathy with what seems to me an arbitrary exercise of power."

"Madam," said Jack, in his most gallant style, "any inconvenience that I may be subjected to is more than compensated by the fact of having called forth such an expression of interest from you. Will it be presuming too far on your kindness to ask you to do an errand from which I shall be detained?"

"Anything I can do for you, sir, I will do with pleasure."

"When you learn its nature," said Jack, with a smile, "I think it will have sufficient interest in itself to claim your sympathy. It is nothing less than a demand on the chaplain of the post for his services at a wedding, at the shanty of the man known as the Fool o' Fiddler's Folly."

The lady looked interested.

"I will see that your commission is faithfully executed."

"Please to send to the bridegroom through the chaplain this message—that the marriage be not consummated until I have had an interview with him."

Mrs. Clymer, bowing last to Jack, with a drooping of the eyelids that made Col. Rawlinson swear under his breath, rode away in the direction of the post, while Jack was escorted toward the scene of the attack on the coach.

The web of circumstance that threatened to entangle him had a spider at its center in the person of Blue-ruin Bob.

We have seen what he was doing to fortify the suspicions roused in Col. Rawlinson's mind.

On the other hand, Mrs. Clymer found herself confronted with this dilemma:—to sacrifice herself, or by her silence, permit an innocent man to go to the gallows.

Under ordinary circumstances, it would not have taken a woman of her character long to decide between such alternatives. But as she rode along, her own lips betrayed a secret influence which might yet prove strong enough to overcome her self-love.

"Oh! I cannot let him die, when a word would set him free!" she cried, clasping her hands over her bosom.

Then the color came into her cheeks, her eyes glowed with delight, and the hot breath of passion fluttered on her lips, as she went on:

"Ah! what eyes he has! His glances thrilled me through and through! It seems as if he had set a harp-string to vibrating in my breast, the quivering of which I can feel even yet! Is this love?—and at first sight! Ha! ha! ha!"

She tried to laugh scornfully; but disdain could not chill the glow at her heart.

It seemed to chagrin her that it was so; and she tried to lash herself into a rage, crying out:

"I, who have so despised the stupid louts! I, who have so played upon their vanity and their baser brutality to secure my own ends! And yet—and yet, he could make me his slave, if he willed it! I am half afraid of him; but—but—"

With a murmur of ecstatic emotion she lashed her horse into a run, bending forward, as if his flying feet lagged behind her throbbing eagerness.

Her eyes were ablaze. A spot of vivid red flamed in either cheek. If Col. Rawlinson could have seen her thus, he must have been led still more under the thrall of her fierce beauty.

But what he lost another profited by. While she was in full career she suddenly came upon a man who, with a small hammer in his hand and a leathern pouch slung on his hip, was collecting geological specimens.

In her excitement, she might have passed him unobserved, but that he stepped out into the road and lifted his hat, speaking in a soft tone which seemed out of place in that rough country.

"Ah, Mrs. Clymer! Aftah so cleverly giving me the slip this mawnin'—"

"Oh, Mr. Averil! You are just the man I am wanting to see!"

"You flatteh me! Allow me to return the compliment by saying that I find you with a chawning colah from your ride. The otheh ladies of the post—"

"Now, Mr. Averil! really, I protest!" cried the coquette. "When you learn the terrible thing that has happened, you will desist from trifling."

"You don't mean to tell me that a horrid catapilleh has actually dropped—"

In mock sympathetic horror he lifted a pair of hands almost as white and soft and shapely as her own, but that they were now hidden from sight in dogskin gloves.

"Stop! pray stop! You don't know how you pain me by levity at such a time."

"My deah Mrs. Clymer! Can you have met with any real annoyance?"

He advanced with sudden seriousness and put his hand on her bridle-rein. His blue eyes were open and alert, and one forgot his blonde mustache and the girlish color in his cheeks.

"It is not I," said the lady, with a thrill of pleasure at the quick rousing of this diletante gentleman in her defense, "but Major Balfour."

"Balfaw?"

"He has been killed! I saw him!" sobbed the lady.

"Oh! You shock me!" cried the minister, with a womanish wincing.

"That is to say," she stammered, whitening to the lips, "I came upon the three brave fellows he had with him lying under and about the wrecked ambulance. They all bore marks of bloody violence, and were apparently quite dead."

"My deah Mrs. Clymer! how painful that you, a lady, should have come upon such a scene. Colonel Rawlinson—"

"I met him on my way back, and informed him of what I had discovered."

"He will lose a good officeh in Balfaw. We shall all regret him. You, Mrs.—"

"Oh! don't speak of it! It is really too dreadful to think about! But there is another matter. You seem to have some restraining influence over Colonel Rawlinson."

"Less than I might wish, I feah!"

"You know his violent prejudices. Well, just before I met him, I overtook a gentleman, of whom I asked my way back to the post; for the shock had left me bewildered. It proved that he was on his way to see you; so he offered to escort me. When I told the colonel what I had seen, he for some unaccountable reason at once suspected the stranger, and even went so far as to arrest him! Was it not a high-handed piece of business?"

A shadowy smile played about the minister's lips. He had not far to go for Colonel Rawlinson's motives. He himself had so far fallen under the fascinations of the fair widow as to be disagreeably conscious that every shoulder-strapped son of Mars at Fort Monico was a pensioner on her smiles. And now her generous warmth in behalf of the stranger was not lost on him.

"A suspicious-looking caracteh, I presume?" he said, willyly.

"Indeed he was not! A more gentlemanly—"

But here the trained self-vigilance of the coquette checked the woman.

"But that is neither here nor there."

You know the autocratic power of the commander of one of these out-of-the-way posts, and the implacability of Colonel Rawlinson. Will you go at once and exercise your influence to see that the stranger has as fair a trial as can be had in this barbarous country?"

"Assuredly!"

And with a promptness which distinguished his actions from his speech, he mounted a horse which he had tied at the side of the road.

"I am sorry to leave you to go to the post alone—"

"I shall accompany you."

He thought that her patent solicitude for the stranger would increase Colonel Rawlinson's hostility; but social conventions left him only a quiet bow of acquiescence.

"But you said that the stranger was on his way to see me."

"He commissioned me to ask your attendance at the shanty of the Fool o' Fiddler's Folly."

"Edwa'd Gawdon?"

"You know his name?"

"Oh! I have been gweatly interested in him from the first of our acquaintance, and have managed to strike up quite a fwiendship. He is no awdinary pehson, I assure you. But what did he wish of me?"

"To officiate at a wedding."

"What! the merciless kehnel has tawn the engaging strangerh from the ahms of his bride? I don't wondeh that your woman's sympathies—"

"But you are mistaken. It is the Foo— Mr. Gordon who is to be married."

"Deah me! I confess my astonishment. He would seem to be the last man—"

"But the last men are the ones who are always doing it!"

The minister flashed his blue eyes round upon her.

"You are to deliver a message to the prospective groom," she said, in an altered tone—"that the ceremony be delayed until the gentleman I met has had an interview with him."

The minister's curiosity was piqued by this enigmatic message; but Mrs. Clymer could throw no light on the subject; and so they rode on toward Red Dump.

As they approached the Fool's shanty, they were startled by a succession of shrill screams. The door was thrown open, and a girl with streaming hair rushed wildly forth.

In the doorway, a moment after, appeared a man whom neither the chaplain nor Mrs. Clymer recognized.

It was the Fool in his new dress and with his hair and beard shorn.

"That looks like your bridegroom," said the minister.

"And the girl an unwilling bride!" echoed the lady.

"But I still insist that Gawdon would not be a party to rascality."

"In any event we will prevent it."

"Undoubtedly."

And, the girl speeding toward them, they spurred to meet her.

Startled by the wild look in her eyes, Averil leaped from his horse.

The girl rushed headlong into his arms, and with a shriek of hysterical laughter swooned dead away.

CHAPTER XVII.

A FROG THAT HAD HIS JUMP.

BLUE-RUIN BOB returned to the camp by a route as circuitous as the one by which he had gone.

He found the place, albeit depleted of the men whom Injun Sid had taken to guard the shanty of the Fool, still presenting a scene of lively excitement.

A rough-looking fellow with a scanty camp-kit, which showed that he was not a "tender-foot," slung over his shoulder to a very much worn spade, was declaiming earnestly to a crowd of eager listeners.

Kid Shannon stood in their midst, staring up at the speaker with eyes, ears and mouth wide open, "taking it all in," as the saying is.

"Bob!—ho, Bob!" shouted one of the crowd, upon discovering the approach of that notable.

"What's the row?" he asked, going up to the crowd, and making his way into the center through a passage opened for him by men of lesser dignity.

"String it off to him, pardner. I reckon you kin give it straighter than any of the rest of us," said one of the men to the miner.

Glibly the stranger narrated the events of the

night before at Cony Flat, as far as they concerned Major Balfour, ending:

"I jumped the place this mornin', the which my luck was clean flabbergasted in that dog-gone hole; an' up the road a piece I come onto what was left of the ambulance, an' three men as dead as salt mackerel!"

"The quartermaster and his crowd?"

"The crowd, but nary quartermaster!"

"An' the grip-sack?"

"Has gone along with the quartermaster—or some better man!"

"Boys, we'll have to look into this."

Bob turned to the crowd.

They assented eagerly.

Opportunity might have put any one of them

in the place of the road-agents, but for all that they never refused a man-hunt. Their indignation was perhaps all the more bitter because of a vague feeling that they had been cheated out of a chance at the grip-sack themselves.

As a candidate for the office of alcalde, it was natural that Bob should put himself at the head of the investigating committee. Therefore no one thought of questioning his method of selecting the men he wished to accompany him. He wanted this one, that one, and the other one; and, in getting them, he managed to rouse the whole camp.

Among the rest, he "routed out" Sly Sam, who was glad enough to be relieved from his arduous task of feigning sleep, where the part required an uninterrupted sounding of his "fog-horn."

Then in a disorganized gang they set out for the scene of the tragedy, with Kid Shannon in the van.

His sharp eyes first caught sight of the wreck; and with a yell such as only a young hoodlum can utter, he darted forward, to be followed by the scarcely less excited men.

In a moment they were swarming without let or hindrance about the ambulance, every one volunteering whatever suggestions occurred to him. Therefore, no one could afterward have told who started the proposal to search for the body of the quartermaster.

As the plotters intended, the hunt for him obliterated all the traces that might have served as clues.

They found him lying stark, with the tell-tale cuff held as in a death-grip.

It was Blue-ruin Bob who disengaged it, and therefore only he knew how loosely it was held.

"Boys," he said, holding it up to view, "we'll find that this hyar was done by some galoot as wears mighty good clo's!"

"Ef he knocks over a paymaster now an' ag'in, he kin afford it," volunteered one of the crowd.

The cuff bore no mark, but was of a peculiar cut, the two edges not corresponding.

Every one was allowed to examine it, but no one professed to have seen anything of the kind before, until it came Eucher-deck Pardee's turn.

He took it in his dirty paw, turning it over and over with great deliberation, until Blue-ruin Bob lost patience with him.

"Waal," he cried, ef you hain't got nothin' to say, you'd better hand it over before you git it so black that it won't look nothin' like its mate, ef we ever find it. I reckon it ain't your cuff."

"Waal, no, not adzactly," admitted Eucher-deck, slowly, as if it were a proposition that required weighing, and quite undisturbed by the derisive laughter of the crowd. "I was jest a-thinkin'."

"Not to much purpose!" said Bob, disdainfully.

And he rescued the cuff from the grimy paw of the bummer.

"Look a-hyar, pardner," said the old reprobate, straightening himself up with a dignity that was sadly impaired by his unsteady equilibrium, "have you ever heard that you can't always tell how fur a frog kin jump by the look of him? You've got to give him the jump!"

"What's that got to do with an old rip like you?" asked Bob. "You won't do much more jumpin' in this wicked world."

"Don't you b'lieve it, my fine buck!" cried Eucher-deck, confidently. "You scorn me because I'm ragged an' whisky-soaked, don't ye? Waal, I'm a better man than you be! I've got a longer head on me than you ever had!"

Blue-ruin Bob uttered an enraged oath, and drew back his ponderous fist to annihilate the man who dared to flout him to his face.

But he thought better of it. He found himself looking down the bore of a revolver!

"Cheese it, my Christian friend!" said Eucher-deck, coolly. "I come from a country whar they chaw up sich men as you, spit 'em out, an' rub 'em into the ground with their foot!"

The crowd, from laughing jeeringly and chaffing the old bummer, was suddenly sobered by this bold stand, and stared at him in wonder.

"He pans out a dog-gone sight better'n he looks!" cried one.

"He has to have his jump, fur a sure-enough fact!" corroborated another.

"Let up on him, Bob!" urged one of the latter's friends.

"You'd better ask the old sodger to let up on Bob!" was a very appropriate suggestion.

"This hyar is a large time fur surprise-parties!" cried a fifth. "Yistid'y it was Ulster Johnny, an' to-day it is this hyar ole stick-in-the-mud! Blow me ef Red Dump ain't pickin' up! I nominate the gent from the frog-pond as the independent candidate fur alcalde!"

This was cheered to the echo, amid great laughter.

Eucher-deck put up his revolver, and taking off his apology for a hat, bowed to the crowd with a broad grin on his dirty mug.

"I reckon the gent wants me to head the temperance ticket," he said.

"Ef you hain't got no conscientious scruples ag'in' that kind o' reform!"

"The whisky ye git in this hyar section o' country ought to make teetotalers out o' the hull community; but ef the gent as nominated me is a sample o' the suckers as is to git away with it, the day fur a temperance boom is a good ways off yit! Howsomedever, this ain't what we're hyar fur."

Then turning to Blue-ruin Bob, he went on:

"Now, pardner, I allow you'd like to know who that thar cuff belongs to?"

"That's jest what we want to know," interrupted Sly Sam, seeing that his sulky principal might repel what would be to the furtherance of their scheme.

He would be glad of the chance to get the identification of Jack Sand's cuff from a source as remote as possible from himself and his partner.

"What do you know about it?" asked Bob, yielding to the evident prompting of the man on whose shrewdness he relied.

"Hand her over, an' we'll see," said Eucher-deck, and received the cuff back.

Passing it to his pard, he asked:

"Ole fel', do ye ketch on to this hyar?"

The old pard eyed it a moment out of one optic, the other being tightly closed, while he swayed and rocked until it seemed a miracle that he kept on his feet without jerking his head off. Presently he said:

"Gi's suthin'!"

Eucher-deck looked round upon the crowd with a bland smile.

"Ye don't git nothin' out o' Betsey, ye understand, without 'ilin' up her tongue-gear," he said.

Half a dozen bottles were handed to him, one of the tenderers laughing:

"It's only a dodge of the old coon to git the drinks out of us!"

"I'd scorn to so abuse yer generosity!" declared Eucher-deck, accepting the fullest bottle for himself, and passing the next to his pard.

After the pair had drained their respective bottles, the old pard put his back against a tree, to slide down to a sitting posture, preparatory to a snooze.

But Eucher-deck caught hold of him and held him up, crying:

"Don't let him git down on ye, gents; ur Moses in the bullrushes couldn't wake him up this side o' sun-down!"

They held the old bumper on his feet, while Eucher-deck once more thrust the cuff under his nose.

"Jest line yer peepers on this hyar, ole man! Did you ever see the like of it before?"

"Las' night!" grunted the old pard.

"Who had 'er on?"

"Hic! Gi's suthin'!"

"Oh! no ye don't! Talk first and swig afterward."

For a long time the old pard balanced in silence, hiccupping sleepily.

"He'll slip away from ye, boss!" said one of the men, in a suppressed tone.

But Eucher-deck knew better. He waited patiently until the old pard suddenly jerked out:

"Uls'er Johnny! Gi's suthin'!"

"Thar ye have it, gents!" cried Eucher-deck, turning in triumph to the astonished crowd. "Don't you never set down on a man because he ain't harnsome!"

Then he told of their encounter with Jack Sand the night before.

And just in the nick of time—for the plotters—Jack made his appearance in charge of the soldiers.

"That thar's the man!" was Eucher-deck Pardee's declaration.

And he pointed an accusing finger at him.

In a flash Colonel Rawlinson grasped the situation. A diabolical smile of gratified malignity flitted across his face.

He made a sign, and two soldiers seized Jack by either arm, while a third deftly disarmed him.

He made no effort at resistance. Once more within twenty-four hours he stood beneath the shadow of the gallows; yet he was as self-possessed as before.

But there was one who had listened to the accusation and witnessed the arrest with open mouth and bulging eyes. To Kid Shannon, Jack Sand was a hero on the limits of whose personal prowess it was unsafe to bet. He expected to see him, single-handed, overthrow his enemies without apparent effort; but seeing him submit so tamely, Kid slipped out of the crowd and ran away at the top of his speed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BLUFFING A BLUE-COAT.

"HALLO!, hyar! What's the row now?" It was Injun Sid's voice challenging Kid Shannon, as the lad rushed headlong almost into his arms.

"Ho, boss!" gasped the boy, breathlessly.

"They've got him!"

"Got him! Got who?"

"Jack Sand!"

"Who's got him?"

"Bob's crowd."

Injun Sid uttered a furious oath.

"The infernal scoundrel! He wouldn't da'st to."

"But he has, all the same."

"Whar air they?"

"Up the road—by the coach!"

"The coach? What coach?"

"I didn't mean the coach, but the ambulance—the quartermas—ter's ambulance, ye know," panted Kid.

"But I don't know. What air ye shoutin' about? Take yer time, an' give it to us straight!"

"Why, don't you know that the hull camp has gone up the road, to see the ambulance that was pulled up last night?"

"No, I don't. We have had our hands full, layin' low hyar, on the lookout fur the detectives."

"Waal, they've stole a march on ye, then. They've nabbed Jack Sand, an' tracked the road-agent biz onto him."

Once more Injun Sid exploded in profane indignation.

"Road-agent! That's all gammon! But, by the eternal geewhillikins! ef Blue-ruin Bob comes any funny business on Jack Sand, it would 'a' been money in his pocket ef he'd never been born!"

Then, turning to the crowd, he shouted:

"Boys, we're wanted up the road!"

"You jest bet we air!" was the hearty response.

"Forward, then! An' remember, it's our alcalde they've got!"

"Hooray fur Jack Sand, the comin' alcalde o' Red Dump!"

"Hooray! Hooray! Hooray!"

"Tiger!"

"Yaaaah!"

"Down with Bje-ruin Bob the dirtiest whelp that ever sot foot in this hyar camp!"

"Hoo-oo-oo! Hoo-oo-oo! Hoo-oo-oo!"

Such cheers, and such groans! The crags rung again with the uproar.

"Forward!" cried Injun Sid, in his stentorian tones. "We don't want no trouble ef we kin help it; but Jack Sand has got to come out o' that scallawag's hands!"

"Thar'll be blood ef he don't!"

And away they rushed in a body.

The most marked characteristic of the gold-hunter is lack of steadfastness of purpose. It is this that makes so easy a stampede on the first rumor of a new find, leaving the populous camp of to-day a desert to-morrow. Those rude fellows, with whom everything must be done at fever heat, throw themselves heart and soul into any enterprise that calls out their sympathies, and as abruptly abandon it for another.

But whatever else an American may be, he is first and always a politician; and the intelligence that their candidate for alcalde was in the hands of the enemy was more than enough to drive out of their heads all thoughts of the stranger they had undertaken to defend. Indeed, no one so much as thought to warn him that he was to be abandoned, and henceforth must look out for himself.

Kid Shannon was almost beside himself with delight at the prominent part he was playing. On the way, he gave a more detailed account of what had happened.

"I don't like this soldier biz!" said Injun Sid, with a frown. "But, by hokey! he's got to have a fair shake, ef it takes all the men in Red Dump to see that he gits it—eh, boys?"

"You jest bet!" was the universal indorsement.

Sid cast his eye critically over his crowd. Of course it was made up of men good, bad and indifferent, since party lines do not part off all the virtuous from all the vicious. Still, his best men were the pick of Red Dump; and taking his crowd in the lump, it averaged far better than Blue-ruin Bob's in point of intelligence and worth.

"Boys," he said, "thar's a good deal in looks. On a count o' noses, I reckon they kin make as good a showin' as we kin; an' ef we go at 'em in a loose mob like this, it'll only be one gang ag'in' another. But ef we could fall into line, in some sort o' shape, I allow it would look a leetle more as ef we was out on biz."

This proposition was received with enthusiasm. Many of the men had been in "the late unpleasantness;" and they not only fell into ranks with a readiness which showed that they had not forgotten their old tactics, but they at once experienced the mutual support which springs from organization.

Thus the rabble that followed at the heels of Jack Sand, as his captors marched him toward

Red Dump, suddenly found themselves confronted by a formidable-looking party of resolute men, with Injun Sid at their head.

"Halt!" he cried to his own men; and the command brought the others to a stand also.

He then advanced boldly, with the air of confident authority which is a man's best defense among foes who have no self-respect to restrain them from the most dastardly assault.

"Who is the head o' this hyar party?" he asked.

"I allow, ef you've got anything to say, you kin say it to me," replied Blue-ruin Bob.

Injun Sid glanced at him contemptuously, and then went on:

"I want the man who is responsible fur holdin' Jack Sand a prisoner."

"He is my prisoner," said Colonel Rawlinson, quietly.

"What do you propose to do with him?"

"Find out whether he is guilty of murdering my quartermaster; and if he is, hang him like a dog."

"I thought you soldiers rubbed a man out by shootin'."

"Not his kind!"

"No, by Judas, you don't!" cried Injun Sid, with a blaze of the eyes and a lift of the head that showed that he gave a quite different significance to the words. "You don't often git a chance at any o' his kind!"

"We propose to make the most of what we've got, then."

"We'll see about that! The question jest now pressin' is—Is he to have a fair show?"

"Undoubtedly. Do you mean to intimate that he is likely to receive any other kind of treatment at my hands?"

"Waal, I'm free to confess that I find you in not the best o' company; an' we have to judge a man more or less by his pals."

Colonel Rawlinson grew white with rage, and his hand involuntarily fell upon the butt of the revolver in his belt.

Blue-ruin Bob turned purple, and his quivering lip disclosed his teeth, showing how keenly he was affected.

But there was that in Injun Sid's eye which was calculated to make any man think twice before openly locking horns with him.

"Look a-hyar, Colonel Rawlinson," he said, "you may be at the head of a squad o' blue-coats, an' it's all right fur them to step off at the word o' command. But out in this hyar country a man is only a man, no matter how many titles he has tagged to his signature, an' counts fur jest what thar is in him, an' no more. Now, what we want, an' what we propose to have, is fair play, an' that a gentleman should be treated as such. Perhaps you don't happen to know who Mr. Jack Sand is."

"I am happy to say that I do not," admitted the colonel.

"Very well! I take pleasure in enlightenin' ye. Jack Sand is the comin' alcalde o' Red Dump; an' he's got a backin' in that camp what proposes to stand by him in this hyar affair ag'in' all comers!"

"That's what's the matter with Hannah!" shouted one of the party thus referred to, who was growing impatient at the slow processes of diplomacy.

"Do you mean to say," asked the colonel, slowly, "that you intend to resist his being put on trial for the murder and robbery of my quartermaster?"

"Not a bit of it, I don't!"

"What then?"

"I mean that we propose to see him treated like a gentleman!"

"And will you be pleased to state what in your opinion constitutes being treated like a gentleman?"

"Waal, sir, it ain't in bein' trussed up like that thar."

"Don't you usually bind prisoners?"

"No, sir! not that kind o' prisoner! It's plain that you ain't usen to the ways o' this country."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Why, turn him over to his friends, to walk like a free man."

"What! turn a man loose who is accused of highway robbery?"

"Only accused, ye understand! And we become personally responsible fur him."

"That isn't my way—"

"It's our way!"

The two men looked into each other's eyes.

Here was a square issue, out of which there was no escape save by a back-down on one side or the other.

The soldier was fortified in his position by his conception of right and common-sense, not to mention his pride. The gold-hunter understood the customs of his section; and to him they were as sacred as "the code" to a Southerner.

The bone of contention—Jack Sand—stood an apparently unconcerned spectator of the struggle.

The better element in Blue-ruin Bob's crowd respected Jack, whatever their political opposition to him; and from the first they had not been in sympathy with the indignity the soldier had put upon him. They had refrained from protesting because their leader had lent it his countenance;

but now they began to exchange glances and look at Bob expectantly.

Bob saw this, and Injun Sid was far from overlooking it.

"Look a-hyar, colonel," said the former, touching the soldier's arm, "the gent is right. That's the way we do things in this hyar country."

Colonel Rawlinson turned round in amazement.

"Are you so easily backed down?" he asked.

"That ain't the question," replied Bob. "It's understood that we don't let up on him none. He stan's his trial, but he goes free on his own recognizance."

Bob meant "recognizance."

Colonel Rawlinson cast his eye over the crowd of his colleague, and saw at a glance that he was not regarded by them with any particular favor. The fact was, they considered him an "outsider." Whatever their contention among themselves, they didn't like foreign intervention.

Moreover, to put the thing in a nut-shell, they didn't like his "style."

The colonel's disgust appeared in his lightened color, in the quiver of his nostrils and the flash of his eyes.

"Since you appear to be so uniform in sentiment," he said, "I yield under protest. But I tell you frankly that, if I had a few more men at my back, I should test your metal first!"

Turning to his soldiers, he said:

"Release him!"

While this command was being executed, Blue-ruin Bob said:

"Boys, thar's them as would like to make it look like as if, because me an' this hyar road-agent happens to be up fur the office of alcalde at the same time, I was tryin' fur to clear the road fur number one by droppin' onto him foul. But I reckon that my record will carry me through as a man that tries to do things mostly on the square."

He was interrupted by wild cheers of indorsement by his crowd.

Some one in Injun Sid's party mockingly cried:

"Bah!"

And it was followed by a general groan.

Sid held up his hand, to admonish them to silence.

They obeyed, but stood looking grim defiance at their adversaries, who glared at them, and with restless movements and muttered threats loosened their weapons.

"Hold on, boys!" cried Blue-ruin Bob in his turn. "We've got better business on hand than fightin' among ourselves!"

A yell of savage intelligence went up at the covert significance in his words.

As Jack Sand stepped forth, once more a free man, Colonel Rawlinson said, sneeringly:

"Allow me to congratulate you on your *re-prieve*!"

"Thank you, colonel!" replied Jack, as he passed him with a bow and an enigmatical smile.

He extended his hand to Injun Sid with unmistakable cordiality.

"I have especially to thank *you*!" he said.

"Don't speak of it!" cried Sid, striking his palm into that of his hero with a genuine Western heartiness.

"Boys," turning to the crowd at his back, "to our next alcalde!"

Such a yell of delight and defiance as went up! Jack seemed to be swallowed up by the crowd of his friends. They nearly pulled him to pieces among them.

Then "all hands" set out for Red Dump, whither we invite the reader to precede them.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LAST BLOW.

THROWN upon their own resources, the detectives followed such clues as they could pick up. One soon separated from his colleagues, to follow a trail of which the reader will be informed in due time. The other two discovered the whereabouts of the fugitive, but also that he was securely guarded.

"It won't do to balk this thing, said Sheriff Morgan. "If there is one thing these fellows never forgive, it is a blunder. If we show that we know how to handle ourselves, they will at least make it a fair test of wits; but if they see that we are green, they will set down on us in a lump, and then you'd better believe this won't be a very healthy country for men of our size and general make-up!"

"But what's to be done?" asked his companion.

"We're three to three hundred!"

"That's all right!" declared the Western sheriff, with calm assurance. "What tells in this country is sand and savvy! We watch our chance, and make sure that when we drop on our man we can snake him out of here and reach the next camp before we are overtaken. Once there, we shall get whole-hearted supporters, to meet only half-hearted opponents. A parley follows; we stand the drinks all round; our late pursuers vote us clever fellows who understand our business, and return home, leaving us to go on our way rejoicing."

"But will they yield him up without a requisition?"

"Oh, bother! What do these men know or care about judicial forms? You of the East do everything on a paper basis; but we ring men on our counter as we do coins."

So these two lay in wait for that chance which always comes to men who know how to seize it as it flits. To them Kid Shannon brought it, in carrying off the guard.

"Now is our opportunity!" cried the sheriff. "You are sure that the horses are ready for instant use?"

"Yes."

"Well, remember that promptness and decision carry the day here. Moreover, weapons are of use only in self-defense. Forward!"

"Good heavens! what's that?"

Like the chaplain and Mrs. Clymer, they were startled by shrieks issuing from the shanty.

As they came in sight, Grace Lothrop rushed forth.

"There's mischief there!" cried the sheriff.

"That girl is in terror."

"There comes the fellow they call the Fool. Why don't he follow her up?"

"That's nothing to us. It's the father we're after."

"See! There comes somebody down the road."

"A woman and a non-combatant."

"A clergyman, by his dress."

"But a fellow with good stuff in him, or I lose my guess."

"Well, that only makes two. We'll have more before we have less."

"Of course. Go on. It's too late to back out now."

While Grace Lothrop ran headlong toward the equestrians, and they spurred to her assistance, the officers of the law ran up to the shanty.

The Fool saw them and evidently recognized them, yet he betrayed no apprehension, but awaited them in the doorway.

"He takes it mighty cool, if he knows what we're after."

"Perhaps he thinks he's ready for us."

"He may be prepared to show fight, eh?"

"That he stands so quietly is no sign that he isn't."

"I must say that a man gets nerve in this country."

"If he didn't fetch it with him or get it very soon after he strikes the foot-hills, it ain't long before he gets sent 'over the range!'"

But let the reader go a little in advance of the officers, to learn why the Fool awaited the enemies of his charge so undisturbed.

Left alone with the dying man and the girl who was so strangely to become his bride, the Fool of Fiddler's Folly was a prey to the wildest oscillations of feeling.

One moment he burned to snatch her up in his arms and devour her with kisses; the next, he could have thrown himself at her feet, to lie with his face in the dust.

Yet he dared not approach her. He dreaded to dispel at a touch the entrancing illusion. He who had suffered so long and so hopelessly was suspicious of the fate that held out to him this dazzling lure.

All this while she did not look round at him. She sat with her eyes riveted upon her father's face, holding his hand.

He lay with closed eyes and fluttering breath, in that fitful dozing which precedes the final sleep.

Then came the startling interruption of the wild cheers and groans of the men at Kid Shannon's announcement.

The Fool started to his feet. Grace Lothrop sprung up, turning to him with affrighted questioning in her eyes. The sick man leaped upright in bed, his eyes wild, his mouth agape, his hands clutching the blankets, while the icy ooze of abject terror stood on his forehead.

"They are coming! they are coming!" he cried. "Keep them off! They shall not touch me! Chains and a prison-cell! Death before ignominy! They shall not touch me, I say!"

"Father! father!" cried the girl, throwing her arms about him.

"Away! You shall not detain me!" he cried, casting her off, and essaying to leap out of bed.

"Help! help!" cried Grace. "Oh, he must not go out of doors again. He will get his death!"

The Fool sprung to her aid; and between them they held him down.

"You have betrayed me!" shrieked the fugitive, struggling frantically. "You have turned even my daughter against me! This is your revenge, you sanctimonious hypocrite! Oh! I might have known you!"

"Father! father!" pleaded his daughter. "We are doing only what is for your good. Will you not trust us? No harm shall come to you."

"George," urged the Fool, "be calm. You are surrounded by friends."

"Traitor!" shrieked the sick man, as he lay gasping.

Then turning to his daughter, he went on, pointing a quivering finger at the Fool:

"Flee him as you would your deadliest foe! He has plotted against your happiness, and

brought my enemies down upon me! For twenty years he has nursed his fancied injuries; and now, to glut his revenge, he would ruin the father and undo the daughter! But there is one who will protect you against him. Where is the man who was here but a moment ago? Find him—this Mr. Sand. He has the power to save you and me."

"Ha! ha!" he cried, with a wild laugh of derision, turning to the Fool. "Do you fancy that we shall not escape you?—I by death; she by a means to which you would prefer death! You dreamed that you were to have it all your own way, eh? Well, I have the rare delight of being able to inform you that you have a rival—and a famous one!—no less a person than the man whose hand you clasped just now! Did you think me the only treacherous friend? All friends are treacherous, my dear fellow, when there is a woman in the case. He loves her—I saw it in his face. And you sent him to fetch the parson? Ha! ha! ha! was there ever such a farce as that! Euchered again, and by a friend! You cannot say that I—that I—Help! I die! And he—he—is my murderer!"

He fell back with the death-rattle in his throat.

His daughter stood petrified with horror, not comprehending the significance of his sudden turning upon the man he had selected for her husband.

She turned to the Fool in dumb appeal.

He shrunk from her, as if awaiting from her hand the death-blow to all his hopes.

The stony look on his face terrified her. She turned again to her father. But his jaw had dropped. He had died with that grin of fiendish derision on his face.

In a sudden panic the girl uttered the shrieks of terror that reached the chaplain and Mrs. Clymer, and the detectives.

Then she fled the presence of that horrified death and the man whose agony of soul made him equally frightful to her.

There was but one idea in her mind. Her father had directed her to Jack Sand. She sought him blindly.

So it was that the Fool stood in the doorway awaiting the approach of the officers of the law.

"We have come to make a prisoner of the man you are harboring," said the sheriff.

"Enter, gentlemen," said the Fool. "There will be no further opposition to your taking what you seek."

He spoke in the dead, mechanical tones of one out of whose breast all hope had died, and stepped to one side to let them pass him.

Wondering, they entered. The dead man seemed to mock their futile designs against his liberty. He had gone where they could not follow him with their legal processes.

"What! dead?" cried Sheriff Morgan.

"He is so much more fortunate than the rest of us!" said the Fool, cynically.

"By why should he die? What was the matter with him?"

"I presume he broke down under the nervous strain."

"It never troubles them until they get caught!" growled the disappointed detective.

"I suppose there is no question that he is really gone?" said the sheriff, suspiciously.

"Satisfy yourselves, gentlemen," said the Fool. "When you have done so, there is one deserving of your consideration."

"His daughter?"

"She as yet knows nothing of her father's real predicament."

"Is that possible?"

"It is true."

"He must have had rare powers of dissimulation."

"His child is rarely unsophisticated. Will it serve any good purpose to cast the shadow of his shortcomings over her young life?"

"Perhaps not."

"I am glad that you are willing to spare her. Let me thank you in her behalf for what she will never know that she owes you."

Sheriff Morgan looked at the speaker keenly.

His impassive face revealed nothing save deep melancholy.

He bowed the officers out of the shanty, and then went back and sat alone with the dead. With his face bowed in his hands, he sat as motionless as the stark figure that lay rigid in his bunk.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WIDOW'S CAPRICE.

THE chaplain took the unconscious girl to Mrs. Shannon's, where she was received with warm Irish sympathy.

"You will protect her from further annoyance?" said the fair widow, following him to the door.

Her look and tone brought the blood into his face.

"You may depend upon it!" he said, lifting to his lips the hand she extended.

"How like a girl he blushes!" she mused, following his retreating figure with a smile. "But he has manly stuff in him, for all that. He tempts me to get up a desperate flirtation with him!"

But at a thought of Jack Sand she retreated into the shanty with heightened color.

Approaching the shanty of the Fool, the minister paused to listen to the wailing notes of a violin burdening the air with the pathos of Annie Laurie.

"What a life of melancholy that man must have led, to make the violin speak like that!" he mused.

He waited so as not to interrupt the strain; but it kept on until his spirits were so depressed that he could no longer endure it. Then he knocked.

The music ceased; he heard slow steps crossing the floor; the door opened; and the saddest man he had ever seen stood framed in the aperture.

His eyes were blood-shot and had dark circles about them. On his face sat a despair beyond words to express.

The violin which he held in his hand helped the minister to recognize him.

"Why, Gawdon!" he exclaimed, "I am truly shocked at your appearance! What has happened, my dear fellow?"

"Come in!" said the Fool, in a hollow voice, and with no change of countenance.

The minister would have taken his hand as he entered; but the Fool seemed not to notice his overture.

Forgetful even of the law of hospitality, he returned to the candle-box which was the only suggestion of a seat in the shanty, leaving his guest to stand, and there sat with his eyes on the blackened embers half buried in the ashes.

The minister at once noticed the stark figure lying in the bunk.

"Dead?" he exclaimed, with the shocked expression of countenance which brought out the womanish side of his character.

"Dead!" echoed the Fool, in a tone which was another trial to the minister's sensitive nerves, and not turning round.

Averil went over to the bedside, and saw that the stranger was indeed beyond the reach of human aid. Then he went up to the Fool, and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Gawdon, what is the meaning of this?" he asked.

The Fool sat with his violin across his thighs, his elbows on his knees, and his hands clutched in his hair.

"There are scores who will be only too glad to tell you all about it," he replied. "If you care to do a merciful thing, you will spare me the necessity of going over it."

The minister stood a moment irresolute, not lifting the friendly pressure of his hand. Then in that soft, persuasive voice which made him a favorite with women, asked:

"Can I do anything for you, Gawdon?"

"No; except—excuse me for saying it—let me alone!"

"You will not forget that I am your friend?"

"Thank you!—no."

Without another word the minister left the shanty, walking softly.

Red Dump was left in possession of its women, who looked sadly faded and haggard by daylight. Their tawdry finery betrayed all its slat-terniness, and their complexions showed the ravages of paint.

They were gathered about the door of the several dance-houses, gossiping excitedly; and on application to them the divine was put in possession of all the facts in a trice.

"How is our patient?" he asked, on presenting himself at Mrs. Shannon's.

"She has recovered consciousness, and is sleeping—rather fitfully. What have you learned?"

"That my faith in Ned Gawdon was not misplaced, for one thing."

"He has made satisfactory explanation?"

"On the contrary, he told me nothing."

"Perhaps you will not be so reticent with me."

"By no means!"

And he told her what he had learned of the situation at the Fool's.

"But," he pursued, "it appears that you were not so fortunate in your estimate of character. The interesting stranger finds himself a prisoner, with very telling evidence against—"

"Impossible!"

"Your confidence in him does credit to your heart, Mrs. Clymeh; but—"

"But—but—he didn't kill Major Balfour! That is to say," she stammered, "he can't have done so. He hasn't the look—"

"Than which nothing is more deceptive—especially in this land of anomalies."

"What is the evidence against him?"

The minister briefly narrated what he had heard.

"But pray do not distress yourself. The fellow—"

"Mr. Averil, I wish to be present at his trial!"

"My dear Mrs. Clymeh!—at a lynching? I was about to beg to be allowed to hurry you out of the camp before the rioters—"

"I took it for granted that you would be shocked. Nevertheless, I shall stay. If you decline to be my escort—"

"Your sex is merciless toward respectful opposition. Of course I would not trust you to the care of another, if you are determined."

"I am obliged to you!"

The widow left the sorely puzzled divine to put his own construction upon her conduct. She was coquette enough to guess that he would think that she had taken a perverse interest in the handsome outlaw, and she was willing that he should so understand it.

"Might I see our patient?" he asked, humbly.

"Certainly."

He tiptoed to the bedside and looked down on the sleeping girl.

Her cheeks were flushed; she tossed her arms about, and muttered in her troubled sleep.

"What has been done for her, poor thing?" he asked, with a womanish tenderness of sympathy.

"Only the simplest remedies."

"Are you not afraid of delirium?"

"She may be a little flighty, but she will get over it with quiet."

But at this moment her delicate ear, perhaps strained expectantly, caught a faint but ominous sound.

"Hark!" she whispered sharply.

The minister listened.

"They are approaching," he said.

"Let us go at once!" cried the widow, seizing his arm with a nervous precipitancy which showed how excited she was.

"Faw the last time, I beg—" began the minister, when she interrupted him with the fierceness of a tiger-cat.

"Will you take me, or won't you?"

Her passion took his breath away.

"I will take you," he replied, with quiet dignity, when he had somewhat recovered.

The widow flushed with mortification.

"I beg your pardon," she replied. "But you were so trying."

"I regret my persistency," he replied. "Of course you will understand—"

"That you are the kindest and most considerate gentleman of my acquaintance! I knew that before. Now if you will prove the most forgiving, too!"

She looked up into his eyes with her most bewitching smile—so bewitching indeed that it almost effaced the effect of that lightning revelation of her true character.

He smiled down into her face as any other man would have done, and they went out together.

The sounds of the approaching mob were now quite audible.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SHADOW OF SUSPICION.

GOADED by his emotions, the Fool sought his accustomed haunts in the wilderness.

In crossing the mountain road he came in sight of the returning mob.

He would have kept on, but a voice called to him, and Jack Sand approached from among his friends.

"May I trouble you to walk along the road with me?"

"I will do so, if you wish it."

"Thank you! I suppose you know why I cannot very well accompany you, instead of asking you to go out of your way?"

"I beg your pardon, but I do not."

"I am a prisoner on parole."

"A prisoner? I thought you were among your friends."

"But, you see beyond Blue-ruin Bob and Colonel Rawlinson, of Fort Monico."

"Ah! I had not observed."

"They are my accusers."

"Of what, may I ask?"

"Of halting and robbing the post ambulance, and killing the quartermaster."

The Fool started, and regarded Jack with blank astonishment.

"I am off the track, sure," said Jack to himself. "Well, I am glad for her sake."

"I suppose you want my evidence, as far as it goes?"

"If you can help divert suspicion from me."

"At what time is the robbery supposed to have taken place?"

"Some time after one, last night. The ambulance left Cony Flat at that time, and you can estimate how long it would take to reach the foot of the long grade."

"But unfortunately I know nothing of your movements earlier than three o'clock."

"I thought that if while out you had chanced to hear or see anything that would lead to another solution of the case—"

"I am sorry that circumstances should have led me away from the chance of discovering anything by which you could profit. Last night I was in the opposite direction."

This was said with the perfect simplicity of a man who had not yet awakened to what might be hidden beneath the other's questions.

But suddenly the Fool turned and looked his interrogator full in the face.

A new expression flashed across his countenance. It was a look of keen questioning. His color rose, and he half-paused, but recovering himself, walked on.

"What is the evidence against you?" he asked, now for the first time guardedly.

Jack told him of the cuff and the bummers.

"But if this is not true, they would seem to be in complicity with—"

"Unfortunately it is true. They directed me to your shanty."

"But the cuff?"

"Is undoubtedly my property."

"I do not understand. How could it have got into the dead man's hand?"

"That is the key to the whole situation."

The Fool gazed at him steadily, as if seeking to read his countenance.

"It looks rather bad, don't it?" asked Jack, his eyes unwaveringly meeting those of the Fool.

The latter did not reply directly.

Presently he turned again, and looked Jack squarely in the face.

"By Jove! he has the eye of a straight man!" mused Jack.

"Mr. Sand," said the other, deliberately, "if we are to approach the solution of this problem at an advantage, we must begin by being perfectly frank with each other, and with the assumption that we are both honest men. There is no disguising the fact that, if you are falsely accused, I am the first person who had an opportunity to take the cuff from your saddle-bags."

There was such a ring of sincerity in this that Jack extended his hand impulsively.

"You make me ashamed of myself!" he cried.

"Here you have accepted my innocence without question, in the face of damning evidence! Well, here goes to make a clean breast of it!"

And he told of his own suspicions and of the message he had sent through Mrs. Clymeh.

"But, remember, I did not know you as well as I do now, and, if it proved that you had a hand in this, I meant to give you a chance to get away."

"You knew that I had consented—yes, plotted!—to marry a mere child who had never seen me until an hour or two before, because I happened to have loved her mother!" said the Fool, bitterly.

"I didn't blame you for that!" cried Jack, impulsively, and added, before he thought: "I envied you your chance too much!"

The Fool whirled upon him like lightning.

"Do you love her?" he cried, his eyes ablaze.

"Come! come!" cried Jack, hastening to repair his unlucky speech. "Are you such a Turk as that? Can't a man pay your bride so innocent a compliment?"

"Why were you so anxious to protect her from me?"

"Could I do less for any woman?"

"But why were you willing that I should escape?"

"I happen to have taken a notion to you. Meanwhile, you are forgetting how freely I went for the parson."

This last lucky thought did more than all the rest to cool the jealousy of the unhappy lover.

"I beg your pardon!" he said. "Let us return to the evidence which is to clear you."

When they had canvassed the matter as thoroughly as possible with the facts then in their possession, the Fool took his leave with the words:

"Injun Sid can hold off the trial until I have pushed the investigation to some sort of conclusion."

"Good-luck go with you!" said Jack. "I hardly know whether I am more interested in getting off myself, or in trapping this gentlemanly aspirant after political honors."

Sly Sam whispered a few hasty words in Blue-ruin Bob's ear; then he too separated from the mob.

"I'm with ye, me boy!" he muttered, with a grin of malicious exultation—his ferret-like eyes fixed upon the Fool.

Then in the falling twilight he proceeded to "shadow" him with the skill of a trained detective.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE HANGING NOOSE.

IN the gathering twilight the mob entered Red Dump, and proceeded at once to the Hard-scrabble Hotel.

To the demand for Jack Sand's luggage Dan Powers returned with his usual nonchalance:

"Go for it, gents! Room 47. As long as you don't quite pull down my house a-gittin' of it, it's your funeral, not mine. But look a-hyar, Bill Roby! thar ain't no manner o' call for you to take a hand. Jest you climb! An' the rest o' you galoots what don't know a hill from a holler! A half-dozen responsible men can do this thing as well as the hull raft of ye."

"He's afraid we'll spile his Brussels carpets!" growled one of the men thus contemned.

"Carpet ur no carpet," returned the landlord, "I don't propose to be run down by your breed o' cattle."

Colonel Rawlinson and Injun Sid, accompanied by three or four of the other representative men of the camp, proceeded to Jack's room; and Blue-ruin Bob was about to make one of the party, when he recalled Sly Sam's last injunction:

"Jest you take a back seat, an' leave this hyar sodger to do the business. He's jest as hot to hang Jack Sand as you be; an' ef you'll only let him go it alone, you kin help eat the chest-

nuts without runnin' the resk o' gittin' yer fingers burnt."

Then Sam had hurriedly slipped away without informing his principal as to his intended movements.

So now Bob stood back, and let the others go alone.

The saddlebags were brought forth in the possession of Col. Rawlinson.

"You see, gentlemen," he said, "that these saddlebags are locked. I suppose the owner has the key."

"I have," admitted Jack.

"We will let him retain possession of it till the time comes to present their contents as testimony. He will then have no chance to say that the bags have been tampered with by enemies."

"Show 'em up now!" cried an impatient vindicator of the law.

"That's the ticket!" yelled another.

"Have patience, gentlemen," urged the colonel.

"In due time—" "Hang yer red tape!" was the irreverent interruption. "One time is as good as another. Ef the other cuff is in thar, we might as well know it fu'st as last. Ef it ain't, let the man go."

"Trot out yer evidence!"

"That's what we're after."

"Tap the blasted thing with a knife, somebody!"

"Hold on, gents! Thar's no use in crowdin'! It's as easy to do the thing the right way as the wrong way."

"Then don't be sich a dog-gone long time about it!"

There was no withstanding a mob in this humor.

"If you will keep cool, gentlemen," said the colonel, white with suppressed rage, "you can have your way."

"That's jest what we want, an' jest what we're boun' to have—an' blasted quick, too!"

"May I trouble you for your key?" asked the colonel of Jack.

"No trouble at all!"

And Jack passed it over with a quiet smile.

"Thanks!" said the colonel, in acknowledgment, through his teeth.

Unlocking the saddlebags, he spread them open on the ground, while the mob crowded round, half climbing on one another's shoulders in their eagerness to see.

"What have they got thar?" yelled one who could see nothing over the intervening heads.

"A mare's nest!" was the facetious response of a would-be wit.

"Come out o' thar, then! Your long years [ears] an' ungodly bray ain't to home in no mare's nest!" was the quick retort.

A yell of laughter drowned what retort the first speaker might have made, and from all sides rose the cry:

"Take him out!"

"Put a compress on him!"

"Tie his years back!"

"Order, gents! Stow your dog-gone foolishness tell we hear what's in the saddlebags!"

"That's right! Cheese it, everybody!"

"Order! order! The colonel's going fur to make his report."

But from those who were bending over Colonel Rawlinson and Injun Sid, as they proceeded with their examination, rose a cross between a yell and a groan of rage.

"What is it? Have they found the other cuff?" was the demand from the outskirts of the crowd.

"I should think they had!"

And the speaker, a giant in size and strength, caught the cuff from the colonel's hand and held it above his head, appealing to the crowd:

"What do we want more'n that?"

A yell went up from the surging mob.

"That settles it!"

"String him up out o' hand!"

"Jest wait one sweet minute, till we git the rope."

"Hold on, gents! Hyar's more evidence."

"We don't want no more! The cuff's enough!"

"But hyar's some o' the blood money!"

They had found the money that Sly Sam had secreted in Jack's luggage.

"How do any o' you know how much money he had honestly belonging to him?" demanded Injun Sid, standing by his friend.

"Maybe I kin give the gentlemen some information on that subject," said Cale Bodie, who will be remembered as the unlucky miner who had discovered the wrecked ambulance and reported it to Red Dump.

"What do you know about it?" asked Sid, roughly.

"At the Crystal Palace last night the accused put what he said was his pile on the table, an' it wasn't the tenth part o' that."

"That might all be; but a gent don't always give away what his pile really is."

"This money does not belong to me," said Jack quietly.

"What's that?" asked Sid, in dismay.

"I never put that money in there."

"Then who did?" asked Blue-ruin Bob gruffly.

Jack Sand turned his eyes upon the speaker in a cool, deliberate scrutiny.

"That's what we hope to discover before this matter is done with."

"You're cheeky!" returned Bob; "but it 'll take all the gall you've got to stand off this crowd!"

"I hope to assist at the hanging of a part of it," said Jack.

"An' by the big horn spoon!" cried Injun Sid, glaring into Bob's eyes, "somebody not a hundred miles from hyar will officiate at the wrong end o' the rope!"

Bob laughed in his face.

"Gents," he said to the crowd, "we're losin' time."

"Judge Lynch! Judge Lynch!" went up the shout on all sides.

"I nominate Blue-ruin Bob!" yelled one of his partisans.

"No, you don't!" interposed one of the other party. "He'd only be too glad to railroad him through out of his way. Injun Sid's the man to take the bench."

"Not much! The colonel is the only disinterested man in this fight. Colonel Rawlinson fur the referee! Give him a call, gents!"

It was plain that the last speaker was more familiar with "mills at fisticuffs and with dog-fights than with judicial proceedings."

"Hold on, gents!" cried another. "Before we go any further, we want a little light on the subject. We can't see in the dark."

"An' I move that we git out o' this hog-wallow. Ef Dan Powers had as much enterprise as he has cheek, he wouldn't have it before his door."

"I have to furnish accommodations fur all comers," retorted Dan, quickly; "an' I'm expectin' some o' your friends!"

The crowd laughed with him, but it moved away from his door further down the street.

This interruption gave the chaplain an opportunity to approach Colonel Rawlinson.

"Pahdon me, colonel," he said, "if I express surprise at your lending countenance to this barbarous proceeding."

Colonel Rawlinson flushed angrily.

"If you will take the trouble to observe," he said, "you will see that it has been taken out of my hands. However, I suppose the principal thing is to get the right man and make an example of him; and the evidence against this fellow is conclusive. I see that you have Mrs. Clymer with you."

"By her insistence."

The colonel frowned more blackly than ever, and swore within himself that Jack Sand should hang, innocent or guilty.

"Have you no influence to delay this until the accused can have a fair chance to make his defense?"

"My dear sir, can you ask such a question in the face of this mob? You are a minister; try moral suasion with them."

"Thank you for the suggestion. I shall act upon it."

A wild roar, such as shows how nearly humanity is allied to the beasts of the jungle, rose from the tumultuous mob.

They had discovered a noose already dangling from a limb of the tree which marked the site where their court was to be held. The prisoner was to stand directly beneath this ominous symbol of bloody violence.

Men came running with torches that flared blood-red, crowned with black smoke. In this lurid light, the surging mob looked not unlike a horde of devils.

The minister got upon a stump which had been left for the accommodation of irrepressible Yankee eloquence.

"Gentlemen!" he cried, "I beg your attention to one word befaw you proceed with this matteh."

At the sound of his voice and the sight of him, a sudden silence fell upon the noisy crowd. He knew that that did not promise well. If they had wanted to hear him, they would have greeted him with boisterous cheers. However, he made his appeal.

For a few minutes he was listened to respectfully. Then a murmur arose; and finally some one broke out:

"That won't do!"

"This hyar ain't psalm-singin'!" shouted another.

"That's so! What does a parson know about hangin'-matches?"

"It ain't no place fur him, nohow!"

And with this beginning the remonstrance swelled until it became apparent that even "the cloth" would not protect the speaker from being cried down.

Godolphin Averil wisely desisted before the dissatisfaction culminated in that yell with which a savage mob overbears all opposition to its will.

The mob proceeded at once to the organization of Judge Lynch's court.

Colonel Rawlinson was called for on all sides; but he was too shrewd to accept the questionable honor, which would bar him from reporting that the prisoner had been taken out of his hands.

After considerable wrangling between the opposed factions, in which every moment seemed to threaten a violent outbreak, Cale Bodie was

selected as a man unbiased by the local political strife.

While the crowd was crowning the new judge with its approval in the shape of a rousing cheer, the Fool made his appearance among them, crowding his way forward.

"Gentlemen," he said, "with your permission I will act for the prisoner, by his election."

The crowd stood dumb with amazement. Then arose a wild uproar.

In such contempt had this man been held, that when he assumed to play the part of a man the prejudice against him was fanned into a flame of indignation, as if he had outraged common-sense and decency; and for the time his very life was in danger from the fury of the mob.

"The Fool!" shouted one, when breathless astonishment left vent for words.

"What has he got to say about it?"

"Why, dog his skin! he ain't fit to defend a litter o' pups, ef they was good fur anything!"

"Snake him out o' that!"

"Down him! Down him!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN UNFORTUNATE DEFENSE.

BUT that Jack's foes opposed him was sufficient reason why Jack's friends should spring to his support; and instantly rose the cry:

"Rally, boys! Ef it comes to a fight, we kin wipe 'em out an' elect our alcalde by acclamation!"

In a twinkling a circle of resolute men formed about the Fool and the prisoner; and cocked weapons bristled in every hand.

"Hold on, gents!" shouted Injun Sid. "Thar ain't no call fur fightin' hyar. What have ye got ag'in' as white a man as ever set foot in this hyar camp? He don't guzzle whisky; he don't chew terbacker; he don't sw'ar; he don't carry shootin'-irons; an' he minds his business! Kin you say anythin' more ag'in' him than that?"

"I allow that's enough!" cried a man to whose charge none of these things could be laid.

"Let 'em choose their own men," said Blue-ruin Bob.

And the opposition to the Fool being thus overborne, business was resumed.

It now appeared that neither party favored even so slight a restraint as the irresponsible jury of Judge Lynch's court.

"Very well, gents," said Cale Bodie. "What have you got to say?"

Sly Sam had hurriedly entered the crowd, and in response to an anxious look from Bob had whispered:

"We've got 'em—only give 'em enough rope!"

"Yer honor," he now said, "we've got mighty little to say, but what thar is of it is goin' to count! In the fu'st place— But thar seems to be more o' this hyar show."

As he interrupted himself, he looked curiously over the heads of the crowd. They followed his gaze, and an ominous silence fell upon them.

Colonel Rawlinson had detailed some of his soldiers to construct litters on which to bear the dead after him into Red Dump; and Sly Sam, with an eye to the dramatic effect, had arranged with them to bring the corpses into the crowd at a signal from him.

The crowd now opened in silence, and the bodies, stark and bloody, were borne in and set down before the man who stood beneath the fatal noose, arraigned for their murder.

He, of iron nerve, looked about into eyes that glared upon him from every side, without the tremor of a muscle.

Then the trial began.

Sly Sam tried to make a point of Jack's having been run out of Cony Flat, the night before, for the killing of Billy Bucklew; but the Fool cleverly parried that thrust by drawing out the true inwardness of that affair through Judge Lynch himself.

Nothing could be said in defense of a man who had allowed himself to be caught cheating at cards.

"At any rate," persisted Sam, "it is owned all 'round that he is on the shoot. Jest stick a pin thar! The prisoner leaves Cony Flat at midnight. At one the major pulls out with the ambulance—"

"Hold on!" whispered Blue-ruin Bob. "Ye're furgittin' Nobody's Nell an'—"

"Jest you keep yer shirt on!" returned Sly Sam, in the same guarded tone. "It's yer uncle that's runnin' this thing!"

He then recurred to the testimony of Eucher-deck Pardee, and produced the cuffs.

In rebuttal the Fool told the story of Jack's ride from Cony Flat to his shanty, as he had got it from Jack, concluding:

"Now, suppose some one also committed the murder. Suppose he went to the Chinaman's shanty, got possession of a pair of Jack's cuffs, and put one of them in the dead major's hand and the other back in Jack's room. Wouldn't the case stand just as it does now?"

"But what is the matter with our friend here? What makes him so pale and restless? We haven't accused him of doing anything of this kind—yet!"

And the speaker pointed at Blue-ruin Bob.

At that the ruffian roared out a furious oath, and drew his revolver.

But Sly Sam struck it down.

"Let him say his say. We'll answer him when our turn comes."

"Gentlemen," pursued the Fool, "will you accept the testimony of a Chinaman?"

This proposition was negatived with furious uproar. Even Jack's friends would not countenance such a thing.

"Very well; it is not necessary. Listen to a plain statement of facts."

He narrated his own encounter with Blue-ruin Bob at the Chinaman's shanty, and Sly Sam's subsequent visit to the Hardscrabble, concluding:

"The question is, first: Why did Blue-ruin Bob want to be shut up alone in the Chinaman's shanty? And, second: Did Sly Sam go back to the room that he at first entered, or did he first go into Jack Sand's room, secrete the cuff which he had got from Bob, and then, coming out, return to the one next to it?"

Amid the storm of opprobrious yells and hoots that assailed him from the other side, Blue-ruin Bob stood like a hunted demon. Left to himself, he would have seen no way out of this arrangement, save by a violent attack on his enemies.

But Sly Sam held him in restraint while he waited patiently to be heard.

"Gents," he said, when the uproar had subsided, "one story's good till another's told. You will allow that the prisoner's counsel has laid himself out. But we propose to give him points."

He then added the fact that he and Bob had been at Cony Flat and seen the grip-sack, concluding:

"But that's all side-talk! Let's come down to hard-pan. Gents, you all know that while the ambulance was bein' pulled, me an' Blue-ruin Bob was in bed, dead drunk!—an' you put us thar with your own hands!"

Words can give no idea of the yell of delight and triumph that burst from Blue-ruin Bob's backers at the making of this telling point. Then they turned upon the Fool with howls of rage and blasphemous denunciation.

"Gentlemen! gentlemen!" he cried, struggling desperately against this flood which threatened to sweep his defenses away, "we do not accuse these men of actually stopping the ambulance. That may have been done by accomplices. But what we insist upon is, that the evidence before us tells as strongly against them as against Jack Sand. Let them explain away their strange maneuvers here to-day."

"Aw, dry up!" yelled one of Bob's crowd, to be promptly seconded by others.

"No, no, boys! It's all right!" laughed Sly Sam. "We don't stand in need o' no gag-law. They've cleverly backed out o' the first count; but they want to hear about Bob's visit to the heathen. Ha! ha! ha! we ain't done yet; an' don't ye furgit it! Let's hear from Blue-ruin Bob!"

"Speak up, ole man, an' give 'em blazes!" cried one of Bob's partisans, slapping him on the back.

"It'll be mighty little!" growled Bob. "I ginerally calculate to go whar I please, stay as long as I please, an' come away when I please. But sense this hyar high-cockalorum has struck the camp, a man can't have a shirt washed until his duds is out o' the way! Waal, gents, with his permission I'm proposin' to walk into the office of alcalde to-morrer in a style that will do credit to my constituency! Eh! what do ye say?"

And striking his hat from behind so as to cant it over his eyes, he threw himself into an attitude of mock importance, with his thumbs thrust through his suspenders.

If he had had the wit to designedly bring party feeling to his support, he could not have made a cleverer hit than he did thus blindly.

His "constituents" laughed, yelled and cheered themselves purple in the face.

"Gentlemen!" cried the Fool, "are grave charges to be set aside by a stroke of buffoonery?"

"Bah!" retorted Blue-ruin Bob, with a malignant scowl.

And this scornful repudiation, as if the matter were worth no more, was the most forcible answer he could have made. He had made his hit by the favor of the gods; and it now behooved him to keep his mouth shut, lest he spoil the effect.

It seemed as if the mob would trample the Fool under foot, in their irritation at his persistence.

But he who had always been looked upon as a coward now calmly withstood a torrent of rage that would have made the stoutest of them blench.

But Sly Sam followed up his advantage.

"Ho, no!" he laughed, "he hain't got enough yet! He's the most inquisitive fellow you ever did see. He went nosin' around among the John's tubs an' buckets, to see ef he couldn't smell out somethin' rotten ag'in' Bob. What he found thar didn't suit him, so he left it; but it suited me to death, so I fetched it away in my breeches pocket. It shows up this sweet chap

what don't gamble nur drink nur chew nur smoke nur use bad language!"

The crowd received this catalogue of virtues with shouts of derisive laughter.

"Ye see," pursued Sam, "when I seen him chinnin' it so thick with the prisoner, an' then slyin' off the minute we struck the camp, I allowed to ketch him up to his tricks; so I follered him up; an' while he was buzzin' the John, fur points, yer humble sarvent was jest outside o' the winder, a-takin' of it all in."

"Oh! he's the pious young man that never fingers the pasteboards, and despises to take a hand in the game he does not understand! But he's up to a neat little bluff, all the same; an' don't you furgit it! He's got heathen witnesses, he has! They're a safe thing to brag on, when ye know that white men done hear to havin' their lives swore away by them worshipers o' the devil. But maybe we kin git at, in a Christian way, what he wanted to tell ye through his pagan friend."

"Will Bill Turner step this way?"

In response to this call, a very spruce young dude—one of the few men in Red Dump who "sport" a "biled" shirt—made his way through the crowd.

In his own estimation, at least, he was a very imposing personage, in his skin-tight pants, bobtailed coat, "plug" hat, yellow kids and cane.

"Oh! ain't he a beauty?" was the first guy that he got from one of Jack's friends.

"Will you tell us what you know about this hyar—this hyar—Waal, I reckon we might as well call it a book as anything," said Sam, producing from his pocket a roll of Chinese paper inscribed with a variety of cabalistic characters, which he was plainly at a loss how to designate.

"Waal, gents," said the exquisite, "this hyar's the Chinaman's laundry book; an' bein's as I happen to know a thing or two about quill-drivin'—"

"That accounts fur you're throwin' up yer job in the States, an' takin' Greeley's advice—eh, pardner?" laughed one of the crowd, significantly.

Mr. Turner glanced at the speaker and smiled. He was willing that an impression should be created that he had figured as a forger. The fact was that he had been a sneak thief and a pickpocket.

"So I buzzed the pagan," he went on, "to tell me what these hyar hi'-rog-lyphics stood fur, an' to let me copy 'em. So, you see, I got to know somethin' about 'em. Now, this hyar's the tally o' my last week's wash. That thar scraggly crow-track means three shirts. Hyar's two pair o' socks. Thar's yer nose-wipes—four o' 'em."

"We don't want yer hull wash-bill, sonny!"

"Waal, hyar's two pair o' cuffs—"

"Jest stick a pin thar!" interposed Sly Sam.

"You kin swar that that's two pair o' cuffs?"

"I kin."

"Gents, do ye see that thar? I want ye to take a good square look at it; because you're goin' to see it ag'in—ur another jest like it."

Those near enough craned their necks to stare at the unintelligible character.

"Suppose we put a mark around it, so's not to lose it?" said Sam.

He then turned to the last page of the scroll.

"Waal, gents," he said, "you see that the last entry has only one tally. What should you call that, Bill?"

"It might be one shirt; but as I never got down to one shirt a week, I couldn't swear to it," answered Mr. Turner, with fine disdain.

"His mother was a washerwoman, that she'd not stint 'um!" shouted one of the crowd—at which a general burst of laughter reproved Mr. Turner's "frills."

"Waal, I happen to know that it's one shirt, an' a dog-gone dirty shirt at that; fur the John put 'er down thar when I passed him over one that had seen four weeks' wear sense it come out o' the creek!"

Blue-ruin Bob made this announcement with that contempt for decency in which the vilest natures delight. His friends, as coarse as he, laughed and cheered him.

"Jest ahead o' Bob's one shirt," said Sam, "hyar ye have a long list—Jack Sand's wash; an' that's what we're after! Do ye see this hyar scratchin'—jest like the one that Bill Turner swore stood for two pair o' cuffs? Look it over, gents. Satisfy yerselves that it's all straight."

They complied, and pronounced it a counterpart of the other.

"Waal, that thar's what the counsel fur the defense found at the heathen's, but didn't think it worth while to fetch away. An' hyar's some more o' his leavin's."

Sam produced from his pocket four cuffs of the same pattern as the one found in Major Balfour's hand. They were wet, having evidently been in the wash-tub.

"Thar you have 'em, gents—the two pair o' cuffs that the John got this mornin'. But maybe the counsel for the defense works by a new kind o' rethmetic. One from two leaves two! by the same rule, two in a shanty-bunk equals two on the road! But the joke don't stop hyar. He allows that I could put the cuff that Blue-ruin Bob didn't git into Jack Sand's saddle-bags

while they were locked up, with the key in Jack's own pocket! You all know that the colonel hyar had to git the key from Jack to git the cuff out."

"An' now, gents, don't ye think that this is a pretty clear case, an' that we've had about enough chin-music over it?"

At that a furious clamor rose for instant execution.

"No more palaver!"

"Make a pair of 'em! Hang up that centimental liar along o' t'other one!"

"Injun Sid, we hain't nothin' ag'in' you; but you kin see you've been backin' the wrong man."

"You've been took in like the rest of us," said one who had thus far ranged himself on the side of the prisoner.

This defection was received by the other side with wild yells. The man whose word would not ordinarily have been considered worthy of a moment's notice, suddenly found himself looked upon as an authority by the party to which he had seceded.

Others showed signs of weakening. The fact was that Jack's supporters were convinced of his guilt. All that held them was party spirit. They waited for their leaders to give the signal for abandonment.

Injun Sid stood irresolute, vacillating between his loyalty to truth on the one hand, and his liking for Jack Sand and his repugnance to being "done" by Blue-ruin Bob on the other.

At this critical moment a furious clatter of horse's hoofs was heard; and a woman with wild eyes and streaming hair dashed up on horseback, too intent upon reaching the gallows-tree to heed whether or not she rode down the men who scattered before her in every direction with cries of alarm and angry protest.

She did not draw rein until she could leap from her saddle almost into Jack Sand's arms. Her horse, unable to check his impetus all at once, kept on into the other side of the crowd, while she was left with her arms about the prisoner, gasping for breath and choking with hysterical sobs, yet transfixing the mob with the fire of her eyes.

Then rose the shout:

"Nobody's Nell!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

NOBODY'S NELL.

THE keenest interest was roused at Cony Flat by word that the man who had been run out of that place the night before had got into another "hole" within twenty-four hours; and every one who could command a horse set out for Red Dump.

But far ahead of all the others, Nobody's Nell spurred, with love and life beckoning, and despair and death following on behind!

And now she had him in her loyal arms; her heart beat wildly against his.

"Oh, Jack! Jack!" she moaned, "I have brought you to this?"

"Hush! hush!" he said, trying to disengage her arms. "This is no place for you. You can do nothing to—"

"But I can do everything!" she cried, straightening up. "I can confound these infamous scoundrels, who are trying to make a scape-goat of you for their crimes!"

"Hush, I say! You know nothing about it. Go into the Hardscrabble, and say nothing to any one until I come to you."

"Indeed, I know all about it. And do you fancy that I would leave you among these wolves, when a word from me will set you free?"

"But I insist upon your remaining silent!" urged Jack, a strange happiness thrilling through and through him at the evidences of her strong love.

"Never!" cried the loyal girl.

"You will only involve yourself in a danger which you do not appreciate, without doing me any good. Go, I beg of you!"

"I can at least do you no harm; and I shall incur no danger that you do not share. Gentlemen—"

"Nell! Nell!"

"Stop, Jack! I will speak!"

"Let the lady have her say," interposed Sly Sam. "You notice, gents, that we ain't the ones that's tryin' to suppress testimony!"

Nell ignored him.

"Will some one kindly tell me how far this trial has proceeded?" she asked.

Cale Bodie summarized the evidence to the satisfaction of everybody.

"No particular prominence seems to have been given to the fact that two of the soldiers were drunk," pursued Nell. "Doesn't it occur to you that this is the kind of advantage robbers might try to secure?"

"Thar's something in that!" cried Injun Sid, plucking up hope again.

"Well, I got those soldiers drunk!"

"The deuce you did!"

"Waal, we don't blame her fur that—ch, boys?" said Sly Sam. "It was all in her line o' business; an' it wa'n't her lookout that they should be in shape to defend the grip-sack."

This exculpation was heartily indorsed on all sides.

Nobody's Nell turned upon Sly Sam with white lips and blazing eyes.

"You devil!" she cried through her set teeth, seeing through his cunning. "You are hedging mightily cleverly. But if I don't show you up—"

Springing upon the stump aforementioned, she thrust her hand into her bosom and drew forth a buckskin bag. Loosening the mouth of it, she held it above her head that all might see, and inverting it, let a shower of gold stream out before her on the ground.

"That," she cried, "is what paid me for getting the soldiers drunk; and there"—pointing an accusing finger at Sly Sam—"stands the Judas!"

Sly Sam let his jaw drop, as if it were thunderstruck.

"Time! time!" yelled one of his opponents.

Sam recovered with the slow smile of one who feels that he has nothing to fear from so absurd a charge.

"Waal, gents," he said, quietly, "that's what I call purty well put!"

His partisans, who had been dismayed, now gave vent to their relief by a long-drawn yell.

"A stickler fur nice points," pursued Sam, "might remind the lady that it was Judas that took the bribe; but I am willin' to make allowance fur excitement an' anxiety fur her man. Ef after what you have seen you have any doubts as to who her man is, hyar comes them as kin put you onto him."

Sam referred to the horsemen who, outstripped by Nell, now dashed up.

With Tony Baxter at their head, it is needless to say that they added nothing to Jack Sand's advantage as they hastily dismounted and mingled with the crowd.

They to a man testified that Nell was regarded as Jack's "woman" in Cony Flat.

At that the girl's eyes flashed, the color came into her cheeks, and she turned to Jack with a smile of tenderness and pride.

Tony Baxter, who had forgotten that she had "stood him off" from his meditated assault on Jack, saw his way to killing two birds with one stone.

"The minute I hyeared that you had him by the leg agin, I says, says I: 'Boys, you hyear me? Nobody's Nell didn't git them sojers cornered fur nuthin'! Ain't that what I said, boys?'"

"He did, fur a fact."

"That is my point," said Sly Sam, delighted that it was so evident that it had occurred to others. "Would she be more likely to fill the blue-coats up fur him, ur fur a man that didn't know her from a side o' sole-leather? As fur me, this is the fu'st time I've hyeared that she got the sojers drunk. Ef I had knowed it, I would have made the point before. It's the best we've got; you'll all allow that."

"Jack! Jack!" whispered Nell, in agony of doubt and fear, "have I only made it worse for you? Is that why you tried to choke me off?"

"No, no! Hush! It's all right," he said.

Tony Baxter, with his insinuating smile, added a last word.

"Ef the committee won't think that I'm puttin' in my bid a leetle too frequent—"

"Spit'er out!" was the cordial invitation.

"Waal, gents, thar's them in this crowd what'll bear me out in sayin' that the prisoner was in close confab with the lady jess before he pulled out o' Cony Flat. What they had particularly interestin' to talk about jest at that time, I leave you to form your own opinion."

"You needn't seek any one to back that testimony!" cried Nell, with a proud lift of the head and the light of a grand happiness in her eyes. "He did have a last word with me just before leaving—a word that I shall never forget as long as I live!"

She slipped her arm through Jack's and pressed it to her side, while she leaned her head against his shoulder.

"We don't deny that, Jack—do we?" she asked, ignoring the presence of the crowd.

He neither repelled nor drew her to him, his face expressing nothing of the emotions that swelled in his breast.

She seemed so much absorbed in her newly acknowledged love as not to notice his impassivity.

"An' now, gents," concluded Sly Sam, "what with tryin' to make out that me an' Bob was pullin' up the ambulance when we was in bed, an' that Bob took out o' the heathen's shanty a cuff that never was in it, an' that I put into his plunder kit—an' it locked up—a cuff that hadn't been out of it sence he put it thar himself; an' now this last dodge—don't you think that the thing begins to look like a put-up job all around?"

Under cover of the uproar that rose, Nell murmured in Jack's ear:

"Are we goin' to die together, Jack?"

It was plain that she saw that her evidence had miscarried. Even Jack's friends believed that her accusation against Sly Sam was a recourse as desperate as ill-judged.

"She'd orter 'a' knowed that sich a stiff wouldn't go down!"

"He knowed it, an' tried his dog-gonedest to choke her off!"

This speech was like a firebrand thrown into stubble, and once more the mob yelled for Jack Sand's blood.

"Waal, gents," said Judge Lynch, "has the defense anything more to say before putting this to a vote?"

At the sight of Nell's devotion, the Fool had turned pale with a throe of envious pain, which Jack's apparent indifference had turned to savage bitterness.

"It comes to other men," he said, "and they put it aside as a thing of little moment!"

Then he dropped his head upon his breast, no longer heeding what was going on about him.

Injun Sid stood with folded arms, a frown of discontent on his face.

It was plain that, unwilling to acknowledge openly that he had been in error, he tacitly washed his hands of the whole affair.

Then a wild yell of exultation went up.

"Pass the rope!" shouted an eager executioner.

But in the midst of this fierce anticipation of the verdict came another interruption.

"Hold on, gents! Hyar's another of 'em. Let's have the whole circus."

"What does she want? Keep her out! We hain't no call fur no more woman in hyar!"

"What's the reason we hain't? Give her a show!"

And amid this clamor a delicately nurtured girl ran a gantlet that would have daunted the boldest of her sex in her rational moments.

CHAPTER XXV.

ON PAROLE.

It was Grace Lothrop, who had taken advantage of Mrs. Shannon's absence in anxious quest of her young hopeful, to rise from her bed of delirium and find her way into the street, possessed with the one idea that her father had sent to seek Jack Sand.

"Oh, Mr. Sand!" she cried, seizing one of his hands, and shrinking close to his side, "save me! Save my poor papa!"

She had staggered as she approached. As she sagged against him, apparently on the point of swooning, Jack threw his arm about her to sustain her.

On the other side of him the woman who had ridden that wild race to throw herself between him and his foes now let go her hold and shrunk from him, staring in anguish and dread at this possible rival.

She now recalled that he had not put his arm about her, nor in any way indicated a response to the wild love she lavished upon him. Could it be that she had mistaken the meaning of that last meeting when he had gone forth an outcast from Cony Flat?

What to her had been the favor or disfavor of the world? Innocent or guilty, in honor or in infamy, she loved him—she was proud to stand at his side!

Reassured by Jack's reception of Nobody's Nell, Mrs. Clymer, when she saw Grace Lothrop's head sink against his breast, remembered that he had gone for the minister to marry her to another.

But there was one whose anguish was not second to that which rent Nell's heart.

The Fool covered his bloodless face with his hands. He felt that Jack had evaded him when asked if he loved her; but now she answered him a more vital question.

He did not feel bitterly toward her. Oh, no! it was her right that her heart should seek its own untrammelled by claims of his.

But now the Rev. Godolphin Averil presented himself, saying:

"Will you allow me to relieve you?"

Before Jack could answer, the girl herself broke out wildly:

"Oh, no, no! Do not let him touch me! Who are these terrible men? My papa's enemies? What do they want with me? Oh! we have done nothing to any one in all our lives that we should be so persecuted!"

"She ain't trustin' the parson!" laughed one of the men, to be joined by the others.

"Gentlemen," said Jack, "you see the situation I am in. Am I released, on my pledge to return, until I can place this helpless child in the care of those who will look after her?"

"Ef thar's no objections, I reckon the gent kin go on his parole, ef so be he ain't too long about it," said Judge Lynch.

"What!" cried Colonel Rawlinson, "let a man fairly take his head out of the noose and walk off, while you wait here for him to come back and slip his head in again?"

At that moment a sharp hiss was heard, accompanied by a vigorous clapping of hands, and followed by the ringing music of Kid Shannon's voice raised in keen delight.

"Go fur'im, Cap'n! Whoop! ain't that beautiful? Take his year off!"

A simultaneous yell rose from the crowd. Only those in the immediate vicinity heard the hurried order of his honor, Judge Lynch:

"The court stands adjourned!"

The crowd was too busy yelling—"Go it, Cap'n!" and—"Pick'im up, Pete!" to attend to anything of such minor importance.

"Cap'n" and "Pete" were a couple of mongrel curs that were idolized by Red Dump, to the last man. It was because they were the only specimens of their species in the camp, and afforded their worshipers the only chance of indulging the excitement before which all others paled.

Cap'n had a crossing of the terrier in his composition, and his frequent battles left his shaggy hair hanging in ragged tufts, so that he looked like a veritable tramp. Pete was some bull; he was sleek of hide, and had suffered curtailment within an inch of his body.

The natural rivalry between the two had been stimulated by the boys until they never met without having a pitched battle, neither being game enough to fight "to a finish."

In the headlong rush that now ensued, Jack had to fairly fight his way out of the crowd, while he strove to prevent the terrified girl from being roughly jostled.

He was followed by the minister; and Mrs. Clymer came forth from the shanty through the open window of which she had witnessed the trial, to meet him and take charge of Grace—a mask, through which she sought to discover his feelings toward the girl.

"My dear sir, let me take this poor child off your hands!"

"Madam, if you could find some place—"

"Now's yer time, boss!" cried Kid, suddenly popping into view. "I sot them critters at it to give ye the chance. I know'd that the boys wouldn't let that beautiful fight go on alone. Jest you cut it; an' nobody'll—"

But Mrs. Clymer caught at the new hope.

"Oh, sir!" she cried, taking the words out of Kid's mouth, "you will go! Go at once! My horse is waiting before the hotel. We will take care of the girl. Go!—oh, go!"

Jack smiled at her calmly.

"Perhaps you do not know that I am on parole," he said.

"Parole!" she repeated, indignantly—"to such scoundrels as those?"

"But it is not their honor that is involved. It is mine."

"Oh! but you can not mean to go back and be hanged, knowing your own innocence?"

"Knowing my own innocence? Have you heard the evidence against me?"

"The most infamous imposture that was ever perpetrated!"

"Thank you for your partiality!" said Jack, with a bow and a smile. "If my judges—"

"But you are losing precious time! You know that you are innocent. Oh! you can not let so foolish a scruple— What is the opinion of such men to you?"

"Nothing whatever. It is my opinion of myself that I have in view. My innocence or guilt can have no bearing upon my having pledged my word to return. But how does it happen that you are so confident of my innocence?"

"Why—you are—I know that you are—that is to say, I have every confidence in you. You do not look like a man who would throw himself away so foolishly and needlessly, not to consider the wickedness of it."

She began stammering, but recovered herself, and, like a spirited racer on the home stretch, finished, looking him boldly, almost defiantly, in the face.

Jack was puzzled by he knew not what.

What was the meaning of the strained anxiety with which she awaited his reply? Jack was what might be called a success with women; but not being vain, it had only taught him to discriminate the signs of real sentiment; and somehow he did not now ascribe her emotion altogether to any impression he had made on her.

He smiled, as one receives a compliment.

"Thank you!" he said. "That I may retain your high opinion of me is another reason why I should hold to my word."

Mrs. Clymer desisted in despair of moving him.

"I see that it is no use!" she said. "Well, let it be so."

Once more Jack was puzzled. A look of desperate resolve overspread her face.

"Meanwhile," he said, lowering his voice to a pitch of gentleness which was a sort of apology for his disappointment of her wish, "this poor child is suffering for the attention—"

"Ah! God be good to us!"

It was Mrs. Shannon's voice. She had followed her hopeful son, to discover that her patient had taken advantage of her absence.

Grace was returned to the widow's, and Jack went back to the redemption of his word, while Mrs. Clymer, resisting the minister's dissuasions, took up her stand again at the window through which she had thus far watched the trial.

Cap'n having this time been the one to first utter the yelp of capitulation and scoot through the crowd with his tail between his legs, greatly to the disgust of his sanguine backers, the crowd gave its attention once more to the graver consideration of whose neck was to stretch for the pulling up of the ambulance.

Meanwhile the Fool had not moved from his place beside the gallows-tree. In the interval he had held with himself such a debate as would be possible only to one of his temperament and sad experience.

What was life to him? Nothing now! The tremulous hopes that he had indulged for an hour had only served to show him the abyss of despair into which he was plunged, now that they were withdrawn.

"But she!—she is young, with love and hope left her. And she has touched his heart—little wonder! To lose him will be to her what the loss of her mother, and now herself, has been to me. God forbid that another should be made to suffer what I have groaned under! What is it? A moment of agony, and then rest! Rest?" he repeated. "It may be reunion with her! I give my life for her daughter's happiness. Can she fail to smile upon me for that?"

A strange ecstasy thrilled through him. He did not realize it; but the anguish of that bitter hour had so wrought upon his brain that it no longer recorded faithfully the outward impressions made upon it, and its inner workings were fitful and uncertain.

The Babel of the mob seemed far away—so far away that it sounded like the continuous roar of falling water, and did not jar upon his senses. The landscape seemed to brighten; and the incense of springtime seemed wafted on the air.

"Grace! Grace!" he whispered, with a feeling that she must hear him.

Then it all came back, and he was surrounded by the mob.

"Waal, gents," said Judge Lynch, "I believe we left off at the most interestin' part o' this ceremony. You see," he continued, bobbing his head to Colonel Rawlinson, as if he thrust the words at him, "that the prisoner has come back and redeemed his parole all right. The only question then is—Air you all of one mind?"

"Hang him!" yelled a stentorian voice, in the crowd.

"Hang him! Hang him!" passed from lip to lip, the sanguinary cry lashing the mob to fury as it gathered in volume.

"Stop, gentlemen!—I pray you stop!" interposed the Fool, lifting his hand above his head to arrest their attention. "I cannot see an innocent man suffer in my stead! You have seen that I defended him to the best of my ability. If I had succeeded in getting him off, I should not have done what I am about to do now. I am about to restore him to his place among honorable men by declaring myself the murderer and robber of these ghastly witnesses of my crime. I ask the pardon of these men"—pointing to Blue-ruin Bob and Sly Sam—"for trying to involve them. Now, do with me as you will—as I deserve!"

He stood before them, a self-condemned man. The mob stared at him in dumb amazement.

At last one found voice.

"Fool?" he cried. "Waal, I sw'ar!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

UNMASKED.

"Oh, no, gents!" cried Sly Sam, "not so much fool as you have thought him! I tell you that we air now gittin' at the true inwardness of this plot. Does any one fancy that a man who had killed four men to git at a few thousand dollars would have such a tender conscience that he couldn't bear to see another swing fur his crime?"

"Oh, no! Nobody would be sich a gosh-hanged fool as that!"

"Wouldn't he be a bigger one to do it if he was innocent?" asked Injun Sid.

"That's so, by hokey! Gents, thar's always two ways to skin an eel—one from the head down, an' t'other from the tail up."

The Fool hastened to improve the advantage thus gained.

"The man whom I have so wronged will tell you that when he entered my shanty he found me out. And remember, if I found Blue-ruin Bob in the Chinaman's shanty, he left me there."

"That's the truth fur oncel!" shouted Blue-ruin Bob.

He cared nothing for the motives that led the Fool to assume a guilt which was not his, so long as it "let him out."

Sly Sam laughed aloud.

"Waal, gents, Red Dump had orter start a church! We've got two saints hyar like you read about. Ef what the Fool says was so, don't you think that the prisoner, who ain't tongue-tied, would have found it in his conscience to give us a hint of this suspicious absence? Do you believe that thar air two men in one camp, total strangers to each other, who air hankerin' to hang in each other's place?"

The crowd showed its skepticism by a dissenting groan.

"Then what does it all mean?" cried Injun Sid, impatiently. "It's got to be one thing or t'other. You can't straddle both hosses, my Christian friend!"

"What's the reason we can't? Suppose they air both guilty? Then wouldn't it be natural that the one that didn't git caught should defend his pal? But if he failed to git him off, would it be natural fur the unlucky one to take all the kicks an' leave the other all the half-pence?"

"Not by a long chalk!" shouted one, who fairly represented the general sentiment.

"Then I'd like to know whether you air goin' to let 'em throw dust in your eyes by this tom-foolery, each claimin' the honor of havin' his neck stretched?"

"Oh, no! They don't sell this crowd that way!"

"Hang the pair of 'em!"

"That's it! We'll be sure o' the right man, anyway!"

"Up they go! No more palaver!"

The crowd began to feel that there was danger of its being cheated out of its victim, in the war of words which left most of their brains hopelessly befogged.

"Gentlemen!" cried Tony Baxter, "I beg the honor o' puttin' the rope about this fellow's neck. He slipped through our fingers in Cony Flat, after rubbin' out a better man than he ever dared to be. Ef you'll do this fur the Flat, we won't furgit ye."

Tony's backers yelled themselves hoarse over this proposition, and Blue-ruin Bob indicated his approval to his crowd.

But once more their bloodthirsty impetuosity was checked, and, as before, by a woman.

"Stop!" cried a voice, so high-pitched that there could be no doubt as to the sex of the speaker, yet so forcible that her imperious nature commanded attention.

Starting from the side of the minister, Mrs. Clymer sprung forward, the crowd giving way before her as she advanced.

Amazement silenced them. They recognized a lady of unimpeached standing—quite a different thing for Nobody's Nell. What could such a one as she have to do with this scene of violence?

"Men of Red Dump!" she cried, having gained their very midst before they had time for a second breath, "you are being misled by the most impudent and bare-faced fraud. I have stood by in silence and seen every effort at the establishment of truth foiled by this clever scoundrel!"—pointing at Sly Sam. "Will nothing do but that a lady must be dragged from the retirement suitable to her

sex into a scene like this, in order that red-handed murder may not hang innocence in place of infamy? If need be, then, I, on my oath before God, denounce this black-browed villain as the murderer and robber that your vengeance is in quest of. I saw him put the cuff which was afterward used as evidence against an innocent man into the dead hand of Major Balfour!"

A moment of blank silence followed the launching of this accusation. The social position of the speaker, added to her fiery indignation, carried conviction to her hearers.

Then Blue-ruin Bob's loss of self-possession ruined all. It did not occur to him that any evasion was possible. He thought only of the revenge with which he had threatened her. Unfortunately for the accomplishment of even this much satisfaction, he began with a flood of vituperative epithet of the foulest description; so that, of what he really wished to say, he got only as far as:

"Why, this Jezebel, puttin' on the airs of a lady, is only my—"

At this point he was felled like an ox, by a blow on the jugular vein, delivered with all the force of a skilled boxer—no less a person than Colonel Rawlinson.

It did not occur to him that this ruffian could have anything to say against the charming widow more than meaningless vituperation, prompted by rage; and by his prompt defense of her dignity he cut off the chance of any damaging revelation.

Pushed to extremity by the peril of the man who had caught her fancy, Mrs. Clymer had resolved to sacrifice herself to save his life; but she was none the less ready to escape the consequences to herself of her generous act if it was possible; so she cried to the colonel:

"Oh, thank you!"

Her voice, her eyes, every gesture, was a masterpiece of acting, from the clapping of her hands over her ears to shut out the foul words with which she was assailed, to the clasping of them about the colonel's arm, with the piteous appeal:

"Oh! take me out of this, please!"

And he, the hero, turned her over to the non-combatant, as she had half-expected and wished, while he remained to complete the vindication of her outraged womanhood.

"May I depend upon you, Averil? There is further work for me here."

Godolphin Averil accepted the charge with a keen sense of the disadvantage of his position in competition with the dashing colonel. It was thus tacitly assumed that he was not the man of action.

Clinging to his arm, the widow put her hand to the other side of her face, as if to screen herself modestly from the gaze of the rude men into the midst of whom the exigency of the case had carried her.

They made way for her with marked reverence.

Meanwhile others—most unexpected—had taken up the contest. Sheriff Morgan and his detectives appeared on the scene, one of the latter bearing two coils of rope.

It will be remembered that one was absent when his colleagues made their descent upon the Fool's shanty, to find that their quarry had escaped them by the gate of death.

"Gentlemen," said the sheriff, "fortunately we have proof corroborative of the testimony just given by the lady. Mr. Kennet, here, will speak for himself, since it is to his sagacity that you owe evidence that would have escaped any but the trained observation of a skillful detective."

Sly Sam stood dismayed. One glance at the coils of rope, and his heart sunk. He divined what was coming next. He "lost his grip." The color faded from his face, and his eyes wavered.

At least this was the interpretation of one who was watching him.

Then came the ominous words:

"Hold on, my fine advocate! We've got you! I see it in your eyes!"

And he was looking down the bore of a revolver held in the graceful hand of Nobody's Nell.

Blue-ruin Bob yet lay *hors de combat*, unconscious of the collapse of his plot.

The detective now proceeded with his testimony.

His suspicions roused by the actions of Sly Sam and Blue-ruin Bob, who, he feared, were plotting to keep the absconding cashier

out of the way, he shadowed them, until he saw the transfer of the cuff which Sly Sam took to the Hardscrabble, and the putting of the other in the dead major's hand by Bob.

Finding that he was on a new scent, he "piped it down fine," until he was able to detail every step of the crime.

Having the advantage of seeing the ground before it had been disturbed, he had cut paper patterns of tracks clearly outlined in the rain-soaked loam.

By following them he learned that Blue-ruin Bob had crossed the road, and that the bullet that had killed Pat Croghan had come from Sly Sam's side; while only Bob had followed the major to his death.

This fastened a murder on each.

Returning to Red Dump, he entered Blue-ruin Bob's shanty, found the ropes with stains of moss on them; found in the ashes the metallic buttons from the bottom of the grip-sack, the frame-work about the mouth having been otherwise disposed of; and digging under the hearth found the bulk of the stolen money.

He also produced a shred of cloth torn from Sly Sam's breeches in climbing, which matched a rent to which he pointed.

Exercising a discretion not uncommon with men of his calling, he pretended not to have seen Mrs. Clymer, though the fact was that he had overheard her compromising dialogue with Blue-ruin Bob. But as her past life had no bearing on the case, and it was not his business to look after the morals of the community in the abstract, he "let her out."

The "boys" listened to his circumstantial narrative, in open-mouthed astonishment at the way in which the traces a criminal leaves behind can be worked up into a picture of his crime.

They made no comment, but waited to see what their leaders would have to say.

Injun Sid extended his hand to Jack Sand in silence.

Jack took it, with his quiet smile.

"Boys," said Sid, turning to the crowd, "we was to elect our alcalde to-morrer. I move that we have it to-night, and that the vote fur Mr. Jack Sand be unanimous!"

Red Dump never heard such a yell as greeted this terse speech.

"All them as is opposed," said Injun Sid, "has got until mornin' to git cl'ar of the place!"

And this was indorsed by a shout even more hearty, if possible, than the one that had just preceded it.

"This hyar election don't go into effect till mornin'," pursued Sid; "so the alcalde-elect don't have nothin' to do with this hyar dirty piece o' business, that we propose to finish up ourselves. Mr. Judge, what's to be done with these hyar scalawags?"

Jack Sand extended his hand next to the Fool, who took it, but without any trace of joy in his clouded face.

"Let us go out," said Jack, gently.

There was one who stood waiting in dumb expectancy. Her hands were pressed against her constricted heart; her breath was held in suspense. Was he going away without a word, a glance for her?

He turned, extending his hand on her side. There was that in his eyes that made tears spring to her own so quickly and so profusely that she could not see him through them. She dashed them away, to assure herself that what she had read was not a delusion, but an ecstatic reality; but they came again, while hysterical sobs choked her so that she could scarcely get her breath.

But his voice—ah! his voice! Nothing could stop her ears to the cadence with which he articulated one little syllable—a syllable with heaven in it for her! It was only this: "Nell!"

With a cry which told him all that was in her heart—more than words could tell in all their lives long—she sprung forward, caught his hand, and dropped her face upon it, covering it with tears and kisses.

"What, Nell! Why, Nell! Is it possible that you can have doubted—for a single instant?" he cried, bending over her and lifting her to his breast.

His dear arms were about her, as hers imprisoned him. Her lips were at his ear.

"How could I know?" she whispered.

"Didn't I tell you last night?"

"Oh, yes!—yes!" she whispered, recalling

the passion of his tones and looks, when he had clung to her hands and gazed into her eyes to read her heart therein. "And, Jack!—I didn't know about the quartermaster or his grip-sack. I thought it was only two blue-coats that had come to the camp to get rid of their pay the shortest way possible, and that he only wanted to fix them so as to lighten their pockets with as little trouble and risk as possible. Jack, you don't believe that I am so wicked that I would lend myself to a murderer?"

"Hush! hush!" he answered her. "Would I make you my wife, if I thought that of you?"

She caught her breath and hugged closer to him.

"Your wife, Jack?"

"Of course. Why not?"

She did not answer him. She was crying softly.

Then in this supreme moment, when all her pain seemed behind her and heaven within sight just on before, a shrill whistle cut the air, to be followed by a wild hubbub of yells and execrations and crackle of pistol-shots in rapid succession.

Nobody's Nell felt Jack Sands start with a quick gasp, and then sag over upon her.

She received him in her arms, and in an agony of terror cried:

"Jack! Jack! Oh, my God!"

Staggering beneath his weight, she sunk upon one knee, while he hung unconscious over her shoulder.

All about them raged a furious battle.

She saw Injun Sid throw up his hands and fall over backward.

Then the murderous visage of Tony Baxter appeared just above hers, as he bent to see if his work had been effective.

She made a quick snatch, and threw up her hand; and his leer of triumph was hidden by the smoke of her revolver.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS.

TRUE to his name, Sly Sam had had a plot within a plot—a "best in the deck," to be played if his cunning manipulation of evidence failed.

There was a score of desperate fellows, more or less, who were bound to Blue-ruin Bob and himself by a secret oath which the community at large knew nothing about.

These he had posted about in the crowd, instructed as to how they were to respond to a signal from him.

Thus, while outsiders supposed that the final issue depended upon "chin-music," he knew that in the last resort he could throw off the mask and carry his point as an avowed outlaw.

Tony Baxter had selected his men with special reference to seeing that there was no mistake about Jack Sand this time; and he knew that they were ready for any act of desperation that he might dictate.

The instant Sly Sam's treachery was apparent, he saw that his cue was to support it; so, whipping out his revolver, he shouted:

"Down they go, boys! We're standin' by Sly Sam, ye onderstand, *all* the while!"

And they sprung to the work with a yell.

A simultaneous volley singled out all the leaders of the opposition.

Then Sly Sam shouted:

"Lights!"

And those who held torches had them snatched from their hands and dashed to the ground.

This evidence of a preconcerted plot, the extent of which could not be estimated, threw into consternation the men who would have struck for law and order; and they scattered in every direction.

But there was a small number in better discipline.

"Rally! rally!" shouted Colonel Rawlinson.

And his men sprung to his side, and in the gloom where only shadowy forms could be dimly made out, and friend could not be distinguished from foe, they blazed away at all who were not of their number.

In the midst of this pandemonium, a woman, the anguish of whose heart fired her with unnatural strength, staggered to her feet under the burden of her precious dead—so she feared—and made her way blindly,

anywhere that she might lay him down in safety and pour out her heart in tears over him.

How she got there she could never afterward tell; but after what seemed an age of struggle, as in some nightmare, she passed the threshold of a shanty, and sunk down on the floor with him.

The room was thronged with men, and vaguely she got the idea that they were in a state of siege.

She heard a woman's voice cry out in pain and alarm:

"Oh, help! help, Mr. Averil! See! see! is he dead?"

She looked up; and at the same instant Mrs. Clymer knelt on the other side of Jack, and essayed to lift his head.

"Keep your hands off of him!" cried Nobody's Nell, seizing the wrist of her rival and flinging it away. "He belongs to me!"

She was like a tigress guarding a wounded whelp.

A moment the women's eyes crossed fire. Then the widow said:

"This creature is beside herself. Do not stand idle, gentlemen, when the last hope may be escaping you. Will nobody do anything?"

The Rev. Godolphin Averil put his hand gently on Nell's shoulder, and said in his most insinuating tones:

"My dear madam, allow me to see if we cannot afford relief—"

"Oh! it is too late—too late!" wailed Nell, wringing her hands in hard, dry-eyed anguish.

But she offered no opposition to the men, and they lifted Jack and laid him in the bunk nailed in one corner.

"Does any one present know anything about wounds?" asked the minister. "Unfortunately, my own knowledge is too limited to be of any practical use in a serious case."

Mrs. Clymer held her breath while she looked about.

None of the men present responded.

Then a look of triumph sprung into her eyes.

"I do!" she declared, stepping forward.

Nobody's Nell made a quick gesture as if to throw her arms about Jack and guard him from the touch of the widow.

Then she waved her off with her hand, and said, in a hard, mechanical way:

"So do I!"

With deft touch she undid his shirt and bared his breast.

There was no stain on its smooth white surface.

"I thought so," she said. "The miserable coyotes dared not stand before him and fire. Turn him over."

The men complied.

She borrowed a knife and cut his shirt down the back.

There all was sodden with his life-blood.

Now stern and white, Nell washed away the blood with a firm hand, and stanching the wound.

Then she had him put in an easy posture, and applied restoratives.

Jack recovered consciousness slowly.

The first thing that he realized was the pressure of one of her hands which held his, and the other stroking his temple, while she regarded him with a strained look of agonized questioning.

He smiled, returned a faint pressure with his hand, and whispered:

"It's all right, Nell, my girl."

Then with a gurgling murmur she dropped her face so that her cheek touched his, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"Hush! hush!" he said, faintly. "I want to speak to you."

She took his head in her arms, and so holding him tried to stifle the sobs that shook her.

"They downed me, didn't they?" he said.

"The murderers!" she cried. "I'll give my life to revenge if I lose you through them! Oh, Jack! Jack! you are not going to leave me just as I have found you?"

"Has the sawbones seen me?"

"No, no! We are surrounded. Don't you hear them outside?"

"I reckon it won't matter much. I feel as if I'd got my dose and was going—over—the rangel!"

"You shall have a doctor!" she cried,

starting up. "If these men are afraid to go out, I am not."

He had closed his eyes wearily, but at her abrupt start he opened them again.

"Wait," he said. "I've got an idea. Where's the parson I—the lady I met brought here?"

The chaplain presented himself.

"Can I do anything for you?" he asked.

"More than any other man ever did for me," Jack replied. "I didn't know that I was fetching you for myself. But if it's all the same to you who you tie up, suppose you fix Nell and me so that I'll have the first claim to her on the other side, you know."

"Jack! Jack!"

Once more she had his head in her arms, with her lips to his.

The widow stood white to the lips and with clinched hands. Must she stay and see this?

She edged back through the crowd, all being too much absorbed in the love scene to heed her.

The sounds outside had receded and died away.

"If it costs me my life!" she muttered between her set teeth.

And in that desperate mood, she undid the fastenings of the door and glided out.

Jack was saying to the chaplain:

"Be quick about it, before I slip away!"

And there, with Nell half-reclining beside him, holding his head on her arm, and while the world seemed to his dull faculties to be shutting in to the circle of her face, the service began which was to make them one forever.

Began, but was not completed; for, in the midst of it, the shanty was invaded by a ruthless band through the doorway which Mrs. Clymer had left unsecured.

"Death to every mother's son!" yelled a voice which every one recognized with a shudder of dread.

Then men struggled hand to hand, giving and receiving ghastly cuts and stunning blows; writhing with every muscle strained to its utmost tension; falling, to be trampled under foot!

The lights were extinguished, and only the flashes of revolvers were left to now and again illuminate a brutal face, distorted with murderous hate.

In the darkness, a woman's shriek cut the air like a knife.

Again, and again, and yet again, at different points, which showed that she was being borne out of the room.

Then came a sudden silencing of that voice. What had they done to her, there in the darkness?

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE CUNNING WIDOW.

SLY SAM knew that he could not hold the camp for any length of time with his handful of men, even if he could capture it, and he could make nothing of it if he had it. So his only purpose was to revenge himself and Bob on their enemies, and get away.

Under surveillance as he was, he could not take part in that first discharge; but if his men had done their work effectively, all whom he hated had gone down before their treacherous fusillade.

Upon the extinction of the torches, therefore, he shouted:

"Rangers, retreat! Don't furgit Bob, hyar!"

Stooping, he caught his superior by one arm and shoulder; another took the opposite arm, and two more did the like by Bob's legs; and thus, surrounded by their men, they set out at a run to abandon the field.

But meanwhile Blue-ruin Bob had had time to recover from the stunning blow dealt him by the colonel, and thoroughly roused by the shaking up of this "rapid transit," he now struck out with his fists and kicked with a vim that defied restraint, belching out a volley of profanity that left no doubt as to his ability to take care of himself.

Those who held his legs were only too glad to drop them, and the others hastened to turn him right end up.

"What's all this?" he demanded, when satisfied that he was in the hands of his friends. "What air ye runnin' away from?"

"Bob," explained Sly Sam, "the whole thing's blowed. Thar ain't no time fur chinnin' jest now; but all that's left us is to slide!"

"The deuce it is! We'll see about that! Air these hyar our men?"

And he peered about among the shadowy figures that surrounded him, to see if he could identify them.

"They air all ours," was Sam's assurance.

"Our men—our solid men?"

"Yes."

"An' whar's the other side? What has been goin' on hyar, anyhow?"

"The colonel soaked you in the ear, you know."

"Soaked me?—the colonel?"

"Why, don't you remember? The lady blowed on you; an' when you—"

But a furious oath showed that Bob's wits had caught at the cue, and come back at a flash.

"That's enough o' that!" he said. "Point me the way to somebody that I kin chaw!"

And frenzied with rage, he drew a revolver in one hand and his bowie in the other, champing his teeth like a wild beast.

"Is Jack Sand dead?" he demanded.

"I hope so," said Sam.

"Hope so! What business have you to hope anything about it? Don't you know?"

"The boys let daylight through him. I know that. But I don't call no man dead until he's under ground. I've seen too many dead men git up an' make things lively."

"Whar is he? I'll see whether he's dead or not!"

He turned down the street toward where the crack of pistol-shots and the yells of enraged men showed that a desperate fight was going on.

"What's that?" he asked. "Some of our men still at it?"

"I reckon it must be Tony Baxter's crowd an' the blue-coats."

This was a fact.

In their blind self-defense the soldiers had rallied round their commander and fallen upon the first men who seemed opposed to them.

In like manner Tony Baxter's men had responded to his call.

He had singled out Jack Sand and made sure of at least one shot. Then as he bent to gloat over his success, or add another if it was required, Nobody's Nell made one of those quick snap-shots for which she was noted, and put him beyond the chance of any further attempts on Jack's life.

His friends saw him throw up his hands, flinging his revolver into the air, and then drop out of sight under the feet of the surging mob.

At that instant the last torch was dashed out, and all was wrapped in darkness.

With furious yells the friends of the fallen "barker" of the Crystal Palace Saloon charged for the spot.

So chance brought them in collision with the soldiers; and the fight for a moment was of a most desperate character.

But discipline told. The trained soldiers drove the disorganized mob—not only Tony's gang, but some of Jack Sand's friends, who in the darkness became mixed with them.

The latter, who had surrounded Jack, and sought to cover Nell's retreat with him, took refuge in a shanty near by; but the men from Cony Flat, knowing that there was no safety for them thus cooped up in the camp of the men they were fighting, continued the struggle outside.

By this misunderstanding Tony Baxter's men at first aided Jack's friends in protecting him from the soldiers, and then gave Blue-ruin Bob's crowd, which had abandoned them under Sly Sam, time to return under the command of their revived leader before Jack's friends had recovered from their panic.

The lights in the various shanties were rapidly being extinguished, since greater security was to be found in the darkness.

As Blue-ruin Bob rushed down the street he shouted:

"Light! light! We can't see what we're doin' without more light!"

And with his own hand he tore down a gasoline lamp which was burning before one of the dance-houses, and threw it into the doorway.

In a flash a broad sheet of flame flooded the street with light.

By it he distinguished Tony Baxter's men from the soldiers, and joined them.

"Go fur 'em!" he yelled. "No quarter! What right has the blue-coated varlets to come hyar, meddlin' with our affairs? Down 'em—every mother's son!"

And with the impetus of the charge the soldiers were swept away like leaves before the wind.

"Ya-a-a-ah!" yelled Bob, now crazed with his triumph. "Whar's this hyar Jack Sand? Whar's this hyar Fool? Whar's this Injun Sid? Whar's this hyar scallawag of a Judge Lynch? Whar's every blasted liar that says this hyar camp don't belong to Blue-ruin Bob? I've got it in my breeches pocket, I have; an' I propose to run it to suit myself! Trot out every man that don't knuckle down to Blue-ruin Bob; an' I'll hang 'em all in a row!"

By this time the front of the dance-house which he had so wantonly fired was all in a blaze, and the whole camp was flooded with its lurid light.

The sight of it added to his savage frenzy.

"Whoop!" he yelled, like a veritable maniac, flinging his arms about, a revolver in one hand and a bowie in the other. "We'll have a lecture hell hyar to-night! I want every one that has testified ag'in' me—men, women, an' children! I'll show 'em what kind of a galoot Blue-ruin Bob is! Trot 'em out!—dead or alive! It don't make on difference to me!"

"What do you propose to do with 'em?" asked Sly Sam.

"Oh, I don't know!" he replied, wildly. "It'll come to me when I git my claws onto 'em! Give us more light, hyar! We want a bonfire on t'other side o' the street! Touch 'em up, boys! The fuel don't cost us nothin'!"

And in pure wantonness another shanty was set on fire.

It was at this moment that Mrs. Clymer issued from the shanty in time to meet the returning victors.

Bob espied her, and swooped down on her with a yell.

"You're my meat!" he shouted, with a savage grin. "I'll show you a trick worth two o' the one you played me!"

The widow had rushed from the shanty with a woman's impulsive recklessness, with only the thought of escaping the necessity of being a witness to the marriage of her rival to the man whom she now persuaded herself that she loved with an insatiable passion; the fact being that she loved herself far better than she did Jack or any one else.

So, finding herself in a desperate strait, her purpose changed with the celerity of a weathercock.

"Bob," she cried, throwing into her voice a confidential cadence which she knew well how to assume, "I have been a fool, and so have you! What right has a man of your stamp to be posing here as an honest citizen of a one-horse mining-camp? You ought to be in the mountains, with a band of good fellows at your back, and your name in the papers from one end of this country to the other!"

"An' what ought you to be doin', my dear, meanwhile?"

"I ought to be sending grist to your mill, until we get enough together to go to Europe on, and be somebody."

"Oh! you ought, ought you? It's odd that you didn't find that out a few minutes ago, before you give me away!"

"I don't mind owning that I had a different fancy from that a few minutes ago; but a good deal has happened since then. I want revenge now; and you're the man that can give it to me!"

"An' then you'll skip, after I've played cat's-paw to your monkey! That's a neat game, but it's old!"

"No. By going in with you I shall cut the ground from under my feet, so that there will be nothing left for me but you. But I've a better reason than that. Bob, I've knocked about a good deal since the old time, but I own to you honestly that I haven't bettered myself. This last experience, within five minutes, has satisfied me that there is no dependence to be put in any one or anything in this world. Give me revenge,

as you're the man to do—I know that of old!—and I will give you loyalty!"

"What revenge?" asked Bob, suspiciously.

"There's a woman in this shanty whom I want to see die by inches!"

"Who else is there in thar?"

For an instant the widow's heart came into her throat.

Could she sacrifice Jack Sand to secure her own safety?

But she found an escape from this ugly way of putting it.

"Bob will get him, anyway. Then why should I sacrifice myself uselessly?"

Even while she so excused her treachery, she knew that this was not the reasoning of a woman who truly loved.

But an instant's hesitancy, with Blue-ruin Bob's suspicious eyes scanning her face, would peril all. If the pause was perceptible, the frankness of her tone neutralized it, as she said:

"Jack Sand."

"Jack Sand!" almost yelled the exultant brute, seizing her by the arm. "Dead or alive?"

"Alive."

"Alive! I'll forgive you everything if you give him into my hands alive!"

The fiendish gloating of his triumph, as she felt him tremble with excitement, made her blood run cold. But she said nothing.

At sight of Bob the wily widow had slipped round the corner of the shanty, and he had followed her into the shadow before overtaking her, so this interview had passed unobserved by his men.

He now hurried her forth, leading her by the arm.

"See that you take good care of her," he said, as he placed her in charge of a couple of his confederates. "If you let her slip through your fingers then look out fur me!"

So she stood in the attitude of a prisoner against her will. By his very suspicion of her he was playing into her hands, if the opportunity offered to play him false. She recognized this with satisfaction, and at once busied her mind with plots to secure her revenge and then escape him. She had no notion of ever being the slave of such a brute again.

"Follow me, boys!" commanded Bob.

And with a rush they burst into the shanty where the marriage of Jack Sand was in progress—on his death-bed, as he supposed.

Over the heads of the intervening crowd Nobody's Nell saw the brutal visage of Blue-ruin Bob, who was at the head of his men, and her heart sunk.

But her love made her strong, and there came a rebound of desperate courage that was ready to fight to the last gasp.

With a downward blow of her open palm she struck out the candle, and then seized the startled divine by the arm.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BY FIRE

"HELP me to put him under the bunk! Quick! quick!" cried Nell, in a hoarse whisper.

She fairly dragged the minister's hands into place; and together they drew Jack from the bunk and rolled him under it.

Then Godolphin Averil sprang into the thick of the fight.

He was no coward, and in a righteous cause he was ready to strike home as firmly as anybody.

But the known violence of Blue-ruin Bob and his cry of "no quarter," added to the flare of the conflagration without, daunted the courage of the little company in the shanty; and after a vain effort to fight their way to the door, they took to the windows, in headlong flight.

As a result, the minister was soon the most conspicuous of the defenders; and coming within a bar of light, he was recognized.

Then rose the cry:

"Kill the parson! Down with the gospel-slingin'!"

But the cry was cut short, and ended in a groan.

Then some one fell against the door, slamming it to, and the room was again wrapped in darkness.

It was then that Blue-ruin Bob, having dimly made out a woman's dress, seized Nell.

"I've got ye, my beauty!" he cried.

"And something more with me!" she retorted.

But he pinioned the hand that menaced him, crying:

"Oh, no ye don't! I've dealt with tiger-cats like you before!"

And with a quick wrench he nearly dislocated her arm, causing the weapon to drop from her nerveless grasp.

Then she shrieked with pain and fear, and tried to bite him, so that he was fain to throw a fold of her dress over her head.

In his iron grasp she was powerless; and he bore her out of the shanty.

An instant later the minister rose from the floor, flinging an assailant from him, and leaped through a window.

His thought was of Mrs. Clymer. He had missed her, and supposed that she had either escaped or been carried out while he was assisting Nell with Jack.

He shuddered at the thought of her in the power of these desperate men. To him she stood for all that is refined and womanly.

But the only chance of rescuing her lay in securing his own freedom.

"Ho! light! light!" yelled Blue-ruin Bob, frenzied with the delight of murder.

And having tied Nell's hands securely behind her so as to render her helpless, and placed a man on guard over her, he rushed off to a burning shanty, tore off a blazing board, and with it applied the torch to the shanty they had just captured, yelling:

"Down with their nests! Smoke 'em out!"

As the dry boards ignited Nell uttered a shriek of horror.

"Stop! stop! you monster! There is a living man in there, who will be burned to death! Oh, where is the hand of heaven, to permit such wickedness?"

But Bob did not hear her. He was interrogating his men.

"Has any one seen Jack Sand?"

No one had.

He swore at them for letting the man whom more than all others he was after escape them. Then he went to Mrs. Clymer.

"You haven't been givin' me a stiff? You air sure that Jack Sand was in the shanty?"

"Yes! yes! and helpless! For mercy's sake have him got out! He will be burned alive!"

"What's that?"

"He is wounded, perhaps fatally. He is lying in the bunk, unable to help himself."

"He is, is he? Ho! ho! We're toastin' his bacon fur 'im, air we? Hal! hal!"

And with ghoulish glee the monster began to rub his hands.

From Mrs. Clymer he went over to where Nell was appealing in agonized shrieks to her guard and writhing vainly to free herself.

"Ho! ho! my dear!" he laughed. "They tell me your lover is in thar. Is that so? Is that so? Hal! hal! hal! hal! ho! ho! ho! We'll roast him; we'll toast him; we'll frizzle him; we'll fry him! Ho! ho! ho! that's a famous barbecue!"

The girl lay panting and glaring at him. There was no use appealing to such a fiend.

She looked about on the other men; but no one dared to move against Bob's will.

Then she fixed her eyes on the blazing shanty, and watched the flames roll round it and lick it up.

It burned like a tinder-box, and almost in an instant was a roaring hell of flame and smoke.

Without a sound she swooned away.

But Blue-ruin Bob had left her, going over to where Jack's trial had taken place.

There lay Major Balfour and faithful Pat Croghan and unfaithful Schaeffer and Murdock, stark in death; and there, almost side by side, lay Injun Sid and Tony Baxter, neither dead, though both were severely wounded.

"Hyar's one of 'em, anyway!" cried Bob.

"We'll give him an extra high swing, by way of honor."

In wanton cruelty he kicked the prostrate man.

"Rouse up hyar, I say! Who's alcalde o' Red Dump, I want to know? Hal! hal! hal! Them as is opposed kin git, eh? Waal, I

reckon most o' them as ain't opposed will git—over the range!—before mornin'!"

He turned to his followers and went on:

"Boys, I'm proposin' to run this camp on a new basis. I'm goin' to make it the head-center of a band o' sports that'll be heard from. An' so's not to have any mistake as to what sort of a crowd we air, I rechristen it 'Robbers' Roost!' How does that sound?"

The proposition was received with a yell of approval, though some, less carried away than Bob, doubted his ability to make his boast good.

"Now scatter," he went on; "an' the man that first brings in the Fool or any big gun of the other side is goin' to be my deputy, an' don't you furgit it! We'll hang 'em all in a row, hyar, fur a warnin' to them as crows before they're out o' the woods!"

He reserved some of the men to do his bidding, and the rest went in search of the leaders of the opposite party.

Sly Sam now tried to reason with his principal.

"Look a-hyar, Bob, you can't carry this thing through."

"What's the reason we can't?"

"Because thar air men enough in this camp to h'ist us out of it so quick that it 'u'd make our heads swim, ef they once git organized."

"Whar air they? You don't see none of 'em lyin' round loose, do ye?"

"You may hyear from 'em any minute, I tell you! Come! come! don't be a fool, Bob. Ef you knock in the head what you've got, an' git out, you're all O. K.; but ef you stop an' play hog, they'll jump you sure, first or last!"

"Let 'em jump! Meanwhile, we might as well git ready fur the show by standin' these hyar galoots up in a row. Fetch ropes hyar!"

"Hyar you air, boss," said one of the men. "Hyar's rope enough to hang all you've got, an' more too."

Indeed, the supply to hang Jack Sand had been bounteous.

"String up these hyar stiffes along o' the rest," ordered Bob, pointing to the dead major and his man. "They'll help out the show. Them two"—indicating Schaeffer and Murdock—"ought to be shot anyhow."

"Pardner," asked Tony Baxter, faintly, "have you got Jack Sand?"

"You bet! an' we give him a taste of what he's to git on t'other side!" laughed Bob.

"What's that?"

"He laid wounded in a shanty down yonder, an' we burnt it over him."

"That knocks my calculations! I wanted the fun o' puttin' the rope around his gullet. You couldn't git me a drop o' water, could ye? I'm powerful dry with this blood-lettin'."

"I suppose you'd orter be tied up."

"When you kin spare the time, pardner."

"Winkler, git him some water. An' you, Sutton, do ye know anythin' about wounds?"

The men set about the tasks assigned; and Bob returned to the more amusing occupation of putting ropes about the necks of the men he had killed the night before.

In the midst of this brutal pastime, a man came running up to him.

"Boss," he cried, "the lady has give you the slip!"

"What's that?" shouted Bob, with a furious oath.

"The lady from the post, you know, that give you away so bad at the trial—"

But a roar of profanity cut short even the hardened wretch who was a worthy follower of such a master; and Bob bounded away to the spot where he had left the subtle widow.

"Curse 'em! I'll cut their hearts out!" he fairly yelled, drawing his bowie as he ran.

But he found both guards unconscious, one of them only stunned, but the other with a gaping wound in his neck through which his life was fast ebbing.

"How did this happen?" he demanded.

But no one had seen the struggle.

"I was jest passin'," explained the man who had brought him word, "an' I hyeared Hank groan. Then I remembered that him an' Dave was left to guard the lady."

"She couldn't have fixed 'em herself," said Bob, sorely puzzled. "Scatter, boys, an' see ef you kin pick her up."

But the search proved fruitless.

Then they returned to the site of the gallops, where another surprise awaited them.

"Whar's Injun Sid?"

Tony Baxter gave such information as he had.

"He has jest been packed off, pardner."

"Who by?"

"That I don't know, fur a fact."

"Bob," said Sly Sam, earnestly, "can't you take a hint without waitin' fur the kick?"

"What do ye mean?"

"Git!"

Blue-ruin Bob looked into his partner's eyes, and then glanced about him into the surrounding darkness.

"Sam," he said, "you've got head, an' maybe you know best."

"You've had some proof of it in the past, I reckon."

"That's so; but—"

"Waal, but?"

"I've got heart; an' blow me ef they haven't got to show their hands open before they scare me out o' this!"

"Boss, hyar they come; an' with a straight flush, ur I'm a liar!"

It was one of the men who gave warning.

Bob turned and saw a semicircle of flame, as two-score of revolvers flashed out in the night.

Then there was a headlong rush; and a voice, which he thought that he recognized without being able exactly to place it, cried:

"Down with the small fry; but leave Blue-ruin Bob and Sly Sam for hanging, if possible!"

CHAPTER XXX.

RAWLINSON TO THE RESCUE.

COLONEL RAWLINSON was not a man to fight for the fun of the thing, nor would he have turned over his hand to secure the triumph of either of the parties in Red Dump. But to rescue the fair widow was a quite different thing.

He had seen her enter the shanty, therefore he tried to force his way into it and bear her away to a place of safety.

Beaten off by numbers, he next resorted to stratagem.

"Boys," he said, having pulled up his flying soldiers, "we can't give the thing up this way. Remember there is a lady exposed to the brutalities of those devils."

"Colonel, they're too many for us," said one of his men, privileged by reason of his age.

"How many have we lost?" asked the colonel.

A muster showed that a full third of the men were missing.

"We *must* get her out of there, if it costs every man!" cried Rawlinson, impatiently.

"If we can't do it by force, we must do it by wit."

"Suppose we creep back an' lay for a chance?"

"That is my idea; and there is not a moment to lose. Hark! What is that?"

"They're at it ag'in, shovel an' tongs!"

Blue-ruin Bob had had his interview with Mrs. Clymer, and had made his rush into the shanty.

A moment later came the shrieks of Nobody's Nell.

"Curse those hounds!" cried the colonel, savagely. "Follow me, my men! But be cautious. Let me creep forward, and then be ready to support me, if necessary."

Approaching the scene of conflict under cover of the shanties, he saw the fair widow under the guard of two men and Nobody's Nell being borne out of the shanty by Blue-ruin Bob.

For the latter he cared nothing; but he at once conceived a plan to rescue the former in a way which would win her admiration and gratitude.

He with complacency saw the shanty burn, little caring who, alive or dead, might burn with it. He was only impatient for the opportunity he awaited.

It came when Blue-ruin Bob went toward the other end of the camp, to the site of the recent trail.

Then the colonel crept forward until with a spring and a blow on the head he stunned one of Mrs. Clymer's guards.

The other attempted to draw a weapon, and even succeeded in discharging it; but the colonel was in time to knock his arm up;

and in the general confusion the shot attracted no attention.

Then the men grappled and fell to the ground together.

"Do not scream!" said the colonel, warningly, to Mrs. Clymer, even as he went to the ground. "I am all right!"

His confident tone showed his perfect self-possession, and inspired the woman with a new respect for him.

She stood with hands clasped over her bosom, watching the struggle as if fascinated. She had not the physical courage to try to aid her rescuer; but early associations had given her a keen admiration of strength and address; and she saw that the colonel was a master of men.

He fought silently, while his opponent yelled lustily for help, until he got him by the throat. Then he could have strangled him to death but that the exigency of the case urged more expeditious measures.

This was his excuse for plunging a knife into his throat.

Then he rose and caught the almost fainting widow in his arms.

He was thrilled to the heart and all his labors and perils repaid, when she clasped him about the neck and murmured faintly:

"Oh, Walter!"

"My darling!" he responded, rapturously, kissing her.

That was their courtship.

It was not altogether cold calculation that decided the widow in this step. True, her available opportunities had been narrowed down to the colonel and the chaplain, what with the death of Major Balfour and the defection of Jack Sand. But, aside from such considerations, the prowess of the colonel had carried her heart by storm. She for the time being loved him as much as it was in her nature to love any one but herself.

"Take me away from here!" she whispered. "I never want to see this dreadful place again, nor any of the people in it!"

"You never shall!" he assured her. "But I shall always remember it with delight. It has brought me my happiness!"

"Don't! don't!" she whispered.

But her arms closed more closely about his neck, and her lips repaid him for his pretty speech, with a shyness which she knew well how to simulate.

So, half in earnest and half with an insincerity which formed the woof of her nature, she gave herself to him—as good a wife, no doubt, as he deserved!

He bore her rapidly to where his men awaited him.

"Boys," he said, "we've got all that we want. There is no use for a mere handful such as we are to attempt anything further until matters have quieted down a little. Where are the horses? We'll come back here with a force that can sweep this place from end to end!"

But they were not to get away so. While making a circuit in the outskirts of the camp to where their horses were, they encountered a body of men moving in the darkness like themselves.

"Halt! Who goes there!" was the challenge.

Col. Rawlinson stood in painful suspense. Were they friends or foes?

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN THE SHADOWS.

SLY SAM's treacherous signal found the Fool completely off his guard, like the others of his party.

At the first discharge a bloody mist seemed to float before his eyes, and he staggered, but recovered himself.

He was partly stunned, though not dangerously wounded, by a bullet grazing one of his temples.

For the first few minutes he had only a confused idea of what he did; but as he gradually came to the full possession of his senses, he found himself alone in the outskirts of the camp, protected by the darkness.

His first thought was of Grace Lothrop. But where could he take her? If the outlaws gained possession of the camp, would not their next step be to raid his shanty?

On the other hand, Mrs. Shannon's shanty was at the end of the camp most distant from that toward which the fighting tended; and unless they gave the rein to all license,

they would have no motive for assailing Grace.

But could not the camp be saved? Surely there must be honest men enough to withstand Blue-ruin Bob and his ruffians.

He saw men skulking about in the shadows, and knew that they could not be of the dominant party. So he hailed them, until he had quite a little company gathered about him.

In time of panic and demoralization master-spirits rise to the top! And now the whole bearing of the Fool had changed.

He spoke firmly, authoritatively, and the men recognized in him a born leader.

Under his direction they went about gathering all the men they could find.

The Fool himself went in the direction of the fight between the soldiers and Tony Baxter's gang.

Of every one he encountered he made inquiry for the other prominent men of his party, and from the answers he got and the failure to meet any of those that he sought, it soon became apparent that the best men had been singled out to be disposed of at the first fire.

Injun Sid had been seen to fall under the gallows-tree; and Jack Sand had been borne, apparently dead or dying, into the shanty about which the fight was still going on.

Then came the rout of the soldiers, the firing of the dance-houses, and the assault on the shanty in which Jack Sand lay.

The camp was a scene of the wildest confusion. Terrified women were rushing out of the shanties and fleeing with shrieks of terror.

"Oh, for a dozen more men!" groaned the Fool. "It would only make matters worse to attack them prematurely and suffer a repulse. And yet Jack Sand *must* be saved!"

He saw the men scrambling through the windows of the shanty, falling to the ground, picking themselves up, and running away.

Then he resolved to make a desperate attempt to save Jack by himself.

He ran up to the back of the shanty as Blue-ruin Bob bore Nobody's Nell through the door, and was just in time to meet the chaplain issuing in his turn through the window.

"Friend," he said, only guessing that it was a friend from the fact of his making his escape in that way. "Is Jack Sand in there, and alive?"

"Ned, is it you?" cried the chaplain.

"What! Averil? This is good luck!"

"I am delighted to see that you have escaped, dear fellow. But this is no place for an exchange of compliments. Come, we may be overtaken at any moment."

"Stop! Is Jack Sand in the shanty?"

"Yes; but wounded so as to be helpless."

"Then he has the greater need of us. Wait, Averil, until I hand him out to you."

"Hold! You do not mean to venture in there? You will never come out alive!"

"I'll risk it. If you are too close pressed, look out for yourself."

"Ned!"

"We'll talk about it afterward."

He was half-way through the window by this time.

Even as he spoke he dropped out of sight. Averil thrust his head in at the window and said:

"He's under the bunk. We rolled him there for safety. You make me ashamed for deserting him; but really, I was thinking of some one else."

This was true. In his anxiety for Mrs. Clymer he had quite forgotten poor Jack.

"Have you found him?" he asked.

"Yes," said the Fool, in a straining voice, which showed that he was drawing Jack from his close quarters.

Then Jack's voice was heard.

"Easy! I guess I can help myself some. By Jove! I don't believe I am so nearly knocked out as I supposed. 'Sh! ah! that's a sharp one, but I guess I can stand it. Gentlemen, I shall owe you something."

"Lift his foot over there, Averil—so! Now, then, there you are!"

They got him through the window, and he stood on his feet, with the chaplain's arm about him, while the Fool made his exit.

"I think I can walk," he said.

"We can carry you."

"No; we can make better time this way." So they hastened away, with the shanty

between them and their foes; and the structure burned without its victim.

Jack was carried to an isolated shanty, for a temporary stop, at least.

"No one will think of looking for him here," said the Fool. "And now for Injun Sid."

"I shall have to ask you to go alone," said the minister. "I have another to look after."

"Good-luck to you, then; and take care of yourself."

So they parted, hurriedly.

Godolphin Averil had the satisfaction of seeing the dashing colonel rescue the woman he had hoped to save; and it must be confessed that he reflected with a momentary thrill of bitterness on the time he had lost in caring for Jack.

Under such circumstances he could not bring himself to join his successful rival; so he turned about and went in the other direction.

He soon came upon a party of men who were on their way to rendezvous at the upper end of the camp, in the neighborhood of the gallows-tree.

This part of the camp was in comparative darkness, the conflagration being at the other end.

Among the wavering shadows the men might flit and escape detection, unless one were on the lookout for them.

Meanwhile the Fool had made his way to the gallows-tree, to rescue Injun Sid while he was waiting for the mustering of a sufficient force to justify an attack on the outlaws.

But Blue-ruin Bob was before him, and was preparing his grand hanging, which was to include the dead as well as the living, when he was called off by the announcement of the widow's escape.

While he was away, the Fool stole in and bore off Injun Sid on his shoulder.

He had only time to get him away in the protecting shadows of the trees, when he was joined by two parties coming from opposite directions to the rendezvous.

"Gentlemen!" he cried, delightedly, peering among them to get some idea of their numbers, "we are all right for a squelching of this thing at a blow. They feel perfectly secure because there has been no opposition. We will open their eyes in a minute! It's a pity that we haven't a rope ready for every one that we get our hands on!"

"Haven't we, though? Well, I thought of that; and as in the hurry I forgot to let go of Blue-ruin Bob's rope, it occurred to me that it would be very appropriate to give him and his crowd the full benefit of it. So here it is."

The speaker was the detective, Kennet; and he exhibited the coils of rope which he had produced in giving his testimony.

"It's a pity we can't give you three cheers!" cried the Fool, taking his hand in congratulation.

"We'll do that when Blue-ruin Bob is dangling at the end o' one o' them," suggested a bystander.

"Hark!" said the Fool.

Even as he spoke the footsteps which had arrested his attention stopped, and a guarded voice was heard to give the challenge:

"Halt! Who goes there?"

With a quick, gliding motion the Fool slipped away.

"Hold, gentlemen!" he said, coming in between the two parties, of which the soldiers formed one, "we are all friends. There are only two parties in Red Dump to-night: road-agents and rioters, and law and order men. Whom have we here? Mr. Bodie?"

"That's the name I'most always go to bed with, pardner."

"I am glad to see you bringing such a good number to the support of our wounded alcalde," said the Fool, significantly. "As his representative, I thank you in his behalf."

Then he turned in the other direction.

"And here we have—"

"Colonel Rawlinson."

"May I ask you to join us, sir, in support of the constituted authority of the camp and for the suppression of riot?"

"If you have men enough to make it worth while to attempt the arrest of the road-agents who robbed my ambulance, I shall be only too glad to lend you what assistance I can."

The Fool had drawn it pretty fine in not

specifying that the "constituted authority" to which he referred was *lawfully* constituted. He now smiled to himself at the colonel's evasion.

However, verbal quibbles were of no consequence, if only he carried his point. So he said:

"We have a sufficient number to capture the whole party if we succeed in springing a surprise on them, which is my aim."

Here he interrupted himself hurriedly.

"See! They are returning this way already! Gentlemen, let us get into position!"

Quickly, yet silently, they arranged for the surprise.

Blue-ruin Bob's men observed no precautions in their movements, supposing that they held undisputed possession of the camp. Some of them had already entered the various saloons and demanded drink, after the arrogant manner of the cowboy who is "painting a camp fire-red."

They came howling down the street, calling to one another to come to the hanging.

As we have seen, Blue-ruin Bob had discovered the escape of Injun Sid, Sam had tendered his prudent advice, and his ruffianly principal had flaunted his defiance, when the Fool gave the order:

"Charge, gentlemen! Down with the small fry; but leave Blue-ruin Bob and Sly Sam for hanging, if possible!"

With a yell the men leaped to the charge, and pandemonium reigned!

CHAPTER XXXII.

A NEW MAN.

"SURROUND them, and bag the whole lot!" shouted the Fool. "Spare all who throw down their arms; but death to every man with a weapon in his hand!"

His confident tone shook the courage of the outlaws.

Blue-ruin Bob tried to counteract its effects.

"Go fur 'em, my bully boys!" he yelled, himself setting the example by springing into the thick of the fight. "Scatter the cowards as ye did a while ago! But this time don't leave so many to come back at ye! Down 'em! down 'em! every mother's son! No quarter, give or take!"

Thus hailed on, his men fought desperately. But equal courage and superior numbers told.

The hour of panic was past. Under the leadership of Ned Gordon, no longer the Fool o' Fiddler's Folly, but now the Hero of Red Dump, his men rushed to battle with confidence in themselves and enthusiasm for their commander.

The outlaws saw the danger of being surrounded, and yielded ground to avoid it.

In vain did Blue-ruin Bob call to them, alternately offering rewards and urging the unqualified ruin of defeat, now decrying their foes and now impeaching their own courage.

"Ho! air ye cowards? At 'em, I say! Remember, ye air fightin' with halters about yer necks! Hasn't every last one of us played at the game of 'Throw up yer Hands?' Which end o' the rope do ye want to be at? Charge, an' down they go! The man who drops the Fool I'll make my second in command! Go fur 'im, boys! Whar's yer pluck?"

He himself sprung for Ned Gordon, with a torrent of blasphemy.

The chambers of both his revolvers being empty, he threw them at his enemies, and plucking his bowie from the back of his neck and snatching another from the man who happened to be nearest to him, without stopping to see whether he was friend or foe, he cut and hewed right and left.

"Leave this gentleman to me!" cried Ned Gordon, imitating his example, by possessing himself of two bowies.

"Hold on, Cap! That ain't the kind o' work you was cut out fur!" cried one of his men. "Let me take a hand hyar. Bob's the devil, with a knife!"

"Look out that Sly Sam don't get away!" replied Gordon. "Stand back, everybody! This is my man! I'll show you that, if I haven't fought with the best of you, it isn't because I didn't know how!"

And as he parried a savage slash of Blue-ruin Bob's, the sparks flew from the griding edges of their weapons.

"Don't nobody touch him, boys!" cried

Bob, showing his teeth with a grimace of fiendish malignity. "He's my meat!"

The general fight was interrupted by this unique duel. Men on either side paused to witness the issue. That a battle should be decided by champions has always had a charm for men.

But Ned Gordon held to the practical aspect of the case.

"See that no one escapes!" he reiterated.

As he spoke he seemed to stumble.

Bob made a ferocious lunge at him.

He caught the bowie on his own; but his hand and Bob's went against his breast with a dull thud.

He made a lightning pass with his left hand, and sprung back to avoid Bob's left.

The spectators thought that he had received a stab in the breast, and yelled in concert—the one side with dismay and the other with triumph.

But why does not Bob follow him up? See! he stands with an expression of mingled hate and terror on his repulsive countenance, like a baffled demon.

His right arm has sunk to his side, the bowie dropping from his grasp.

He struggles to lift it. It is powerless!

He drops his other bowie, and clasps his palsied right arm. It will never serve his wicked will again. The muscle has been severed to the bone!

Neither side realizes that the fight can be over so soon—that the terrible Blue-ruin Bob can be a conquered man without having drawn a drop of his opponent's blood.

But Bob himself knows it; and his master knows it, too!

"Surrender!" he cries, his face lighted with an expression which no one who witnesses it ever forgets.

It is not the look of one who intends to kill his man, but the confident determination to take him alive.

Blue-ruin Bob, who has stood like one turned to stone, utters a sudden yell of terror, as the vision of the gallows flits before his imagination—it is his helplessness that makes a coward of him—and turning, flees headlong, blindly!

Ned Gordon springs after him, with a leap which shows that he who has always been regarded as a non-combatant is in reality an athlete of the first order, and with a downward blow strikes him on the head with the end of his bowie-hilt.

He drops like a felled ox!

Then the spell is broken.

With yells of terror the followers of the beaten champion turn to fly. With yells of triumph their pitiless foes spring after them.

Sly Sam is the most active of the lot. Moreover, he has had the shrewdness to take advantage of the momentary suspension of hostilities to edge his way to where he would have something of a start, if his principal happened to have found his match.

Shots are sent after him; but, as if he bore a charmed life, he keeps on.

He is outstripping his pursuers, when one who is his master in a foot-race as in other things "takes a hand."

Ned Gordon shouts:

"Bodie, see that this ruffian does not revive and give us the slip!"

Then he springs in pursuit of the one other man whom he especially desires to see swing from the bough that has so nearly suspended him between heaven and earth.

He has nothing in his hands; but a revolver with which, contrary to his wont, he has armed himself for this fight bobs up and down on his hip as he runs, like an athlete, with lips compressed and clinched fists brought up to his shoulders.

Sly Sam knows that the conformation of the gulch in which the camp is located is such that, if he abandons the street, which is only a part of the mountain-road, for the security of the darkness, he will only increase his chances of being ultimately taken; so he runs the risk of being overtaken by a pistol-ball, and keeps straight down the street.

He glances over his shoulder and sees that the race is between him and Ned Gordon, but that he is no match for his pursuer.

Suddenly he stops and throws up his hand with a cocked revolver in it, to take deadly aim at the man he cannot elude.

But Gordon stops as abruptly; his hand

flies up to a line with his eye; and his revolver speaks first.

But even as it explodes he leaps to one side, and then resumes the chase.

Sly Sam's revolver is seen to drop from his hand. He stands for a moment with his arm hanging at his side, and then turning, speeds on.

The boys are yelling themselves hoarse with enthusiastic admiration of the butt of any man's gibe but yesterday; henceforth to be the wonder and boast of Red Dump. In every emergency as it arises he seems to surpass anything they have ever seen.

Before he gets beyond the range of light from the blazing shanties which he himself helped to ignite, Sly Sam turns at bay.

The two men grapple and go down.

The boys rush on, to be in time to see the beautiful wrestling match that ensues.

Only a few are in time to see him twist one of Sam's hands under his back. Then with a quick wrench he rolls him over upon his face, catches the other hand and crosses it over the one he already has, plants his knee between his shoulders, and looking up, says, quietly:

"Gentlemen, have you a piece of rope? But, never mind. His belt will do."

And in a twinkling Sly Sam lies gasping and grinding his teeth in impotent rage. As vain his profane blackguardism. He is a helpless prisoner.

The boys gather about Ned Gordon, every one eager to grasp his hand, vying with one another in open homage.

Now that the excitement of the struggle is over, he replies to them good-naturedly, yet a little wearily. He leaves them to dispose of the prisoner. He does not even look after him as they drag him to the gallows-tree, while Blue-ruin Bob and Tony Baxter already await him with the rope about their necks.

But if the hanging holds no interest for him, it does for another. Mrs. Clymer watches Blue-ruin Bob from the darkness with her heart in her mouth.

Will he recover and denounce her? That revenge on a woman would be a worthy last act of his treacherous life.

But the boys do not wait for this. Before he recovers from the stunning blow his dangling body is twirling round and round, as its weight untwists the strands of the rope; and, shuddering with horror, the widow breathes more easily.

Having got rid of his admirers, Ned Gordon comes upon a woman sitting on the ground before a shanty which is fast crumbling under the touch of the fire-fiend.

Her hands are clasped in her lap, her arms extended rigidly, and her eyes, with a hard glitter in them, as if she were driven to the verge of insanity with her hopeless grief, stare straight into the fire.

Ned Gordon puts his hand gently on her shoulder.

"My poor woman," he says, "come with me."

She looks up vacantly. It is Nobody's Nell, but so changed as to be hardly recognizable.

He knows that he can relieve all this, and give back the old beauty to her cheek, the old gay sparkle to her eye. But who can lift the load off *his* heart?

Thinking of this wretched contrast, he does not tell her the heaven of delight he has in store for her. He only repeats:

"Come!"

And she gets up and follows him, without interest, as without question.

As they approach the shanty where he had left Jack, he starts. He sees a light where he had left him in darkness.

He hurries his steps; but before he reaches the latch the door opens from within, and a man stands in the aperture.

"Hallo!" he says, familiarly. "You are just in time. As I don't kill people in your bungling way, there was no call for me over yonder; so I thought I would put in my time patching up—"

But his trifling speech is cut short by a shriek that is a severe strain to even his tried nerves, and he is nearly knocked down by a body that, leaping from the darkness, darts by him into the house.

"Good heavens! what's that?" he cries, turning round.

What he sees is a woman on her knees be-

fore a man sitting in a chair. She has flung her arms about him and the chair too in her greedy love, and with her head thrown back so that she can gaze into his face, is screaming at the top of her voice, as if he would escape her if she did not succeed in calling him back:

"Jack! Jack! Jack! Oh, Jack!"

And he, with her face clasped between his two hands, is smiling down into it, and saying:

"Why, Nell! Nell! do you love me so?"

Ned Gordon looks in upon this scene of ecstatic happiness from under gloomy brows, and then, setting his teeth hard, turns away without a word.

"Well!" exclaims the humorous surgeon, "there ain't anything in that to make a man's blood run cold! But I reckon you don't want any one hanging about here just about this time o' day, so I'll take myself off, tendering you my sympathy!"

"Oh, yes we do!" said Jack, answering the first part of his observation. "If you can find the parson anywhere about, oblige me by sending him round here, with as many of the boys as think a wedding more entertaining than a hanging-match!"

"Some think that being hanged and getting married amount to pretty much the same thing," said the surgeon. "But for my part, if I were forced to a choice between them, I think I should prefer the hang—that is to say, matrimony! But I will deliver your message, and let every one choose for himself."

He was just in time to see Mrs. Clymer ride away in the company of Colonel Rawlinson; and he had to speak twice before he succeeded in drawing the minister from his abstraction.

The boys received the invitation to the wedding with enthusiasm, and swore that Ned Gordon ought to stand as Jack's best man. But a moment before Kid Shannon had plucked him by the arm, saying:

"Boss, she's a-callin' for ye."

"Who?" asked Gordon, dully.

"Why, the little gal—your little gal, ye know!"

The man stared stupidly at the lad.

"Come along!" urged Kid, pulling him.

And without a word he was led to where Grace awaited him.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"O. K."

SHE was in Mrs. Shannon's bed, looking pale, yet now perfectly rational. But what was it that she held in her hand? A ribbon fell over her fingers, and he caught the glint of gold through them. It was a miniature at which she was gazing intently.

She looked up as he approached, with a wan smile of welcome.

"Oh! you have come!" she exclaimed, extending her hand.

With bated breath and head in a whirl he went up to her and took the offered hand.

What was the meaning of this wistful expectancy, that gave place to shy embarrassment and concern, as he stood gazing at her?

She slipped her hand out of his, and with cheeks aflame, hid the miniature under the bed-clothes.

"You are angry with me?" she said, her lip quivering.

"Angry with you? Oh, no!" he exclaimed, his voice vibrant with pain. "No, no, my child! Nothing could ever make me angry with you!"

"Then why do you look and—and—act so strangely?"

And her eyes brimmed over with hurt tears.

"Look—act strangely?" he repeated, bending over her with a yearning beyond words to express. "What can I do—what can I say to prove that—that—"

He broke down, dropped his face on the bed beside her, and struggled vainly with the great throes of pain that shook his frame.

"Oh, don't!—please don't! You frighten me!" she cried, slipping her hand under his face to lift it up.

This was too much. He caught it and devoured it with kisses.

"Then—then—you do love me?" she asked. "I—I was afraid— You looked so stern, you know—"

"Love you!" he cried, with a gush of tenderness. "Oh, that I could win from

you a tithe of the— But, no! no! it cannot be!"

"Why," she exclaimed, looking sweetly upon him, "I have loved you all my life, I think. Look!"

And she drew forth the miniature which, a moment before, she had secreted.

"Mamma gave it to me when I was the teeny-weeniest little thing, and told me that I was to love you if I ever found you anywhere in the world; and I have been waiting for you ever since."

"Love me!" repeated Gordon, in whose brain there seemed room for no other thought.

She took hold of one side of his mustache and drew his face toward her, saying, with a coquettish smile:

"You don't deserve it; but then—"

She pursed up her lips as a suitable conclusion of the sentence.

"My God! is it possible?" he cried.

"Is what possible?" she asked.

But, without reply, he caught her in his arms.

She clasped him about the neck with a little laugh of ecstasy, and there was no longer any misunderstanding between them.

Presently she said:

"You must tell papa that I can't go to him. I tried to get up a little while ago, and I couldn't stand on my feet. Do you know?—I can't remember how I got here. It all seems so strange."

And she brushed her hand across her forehead.

Gordon started. That terrible scene had been blotted out of her memory! In the anguish of his soul, he had not given it a thought either. Then she did not know that her father was dead. He resolved not to enlighten her for the present.

"My darling," he breathed, winding his arms about her, "you love me?"

"Why, of course!" she answered, with that glad intonation which has made many a lover's heart bound.

"I want you to be my wife!"

"Is it possible?" archly.

"But without a moment's delay."

"Hal! hal! Are you so afraid of losing me?"

"Yes! yes! Do not deny me!"

"Oh! but how can I? You see how ill I am."

Then he fell to pleading with her, so fervently that she saw that he hung upon her consent as a dying man might cling to the boon of life; and in the end she yielded, convinced in her love if not in her reason.

He ran out to find Jack's marriage just concluded, and the boys making the crags resound with their cheers for the new alcalde and his bride.

"Why, what's the matter? You are beside yourself!" cried Jack, as Ned wrung his hand. "Look out, old fellow! Please to remember that I am not a well man by any means, though a lucky rib kept that bullet from making a hole that it wouldn't have been easy to mend. It was so close over my heart that I thought it had gone clean through me. But what *has* come over you?"

"I've come to borrow your parson!" cried Gordon, gayly. "I leave you to guess the rest! Averill!"

"Gawdon, I do congratulate you! You're one of the men who have got their deserts to-night!"

"You ran away, I understand, from being my best man," said Jack; "but hang me if I don't act in that capacity for you, by my own invitation!"

"Boys, you'll have to carry me along, too!" said a rather weak voice.

Gordon looked, and saw Injun Sid.

"Can't I be second best?" he asked. "I owe you my life as well as Jack does."

"If you won't say anything more about that," replied Gordon, receiving the warm pressure of his hand.

So they adjourned to the widow Shannon's, where Ned Gordon received compensation in full for all the weary sorrow of his life, while the boys yelled themselves hoarse outside.

"Fool!" cried one, who fairly represented the general sentiment, "dang my hide ef it wouldn't be the bulliest thing that ever struck this hyar camp to have a lot more o' the same kind!"

THE END.

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